

Sarazanmai



NOVEL
2

Kunihiko Ikuhara
Teruko Utsumi

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2

WRITTEN BY

Kunihiko Ikuhara
Teruko Utsumi



Seven Seas Entertainment

SARAZANMAI NOVEL VOLUME 2
by Ikuhara Kunihiko / Utsumi Teruko / miggy

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Our Intertwined Hands...

Prologue:

Two Lone Children

IT WAS JUST COINCIDENCE, at first. We probably weren't fated for each other. The end came suddenly, and I understood. After all, you and I were one. I knew it. I just pretended not to.

That night, I wished there would be no more endings or beginnings. If you and I could just melt into one, then we wouldn't even need to hold hands. But time marched on, and our moment ended. The world kept breathing, as if it didn't care where we were.

Still, without an end or a beginning, you and I would never have met. The warmth of our connection—something less certain than fate—would never have existed.

Plate 7: Balls

Scene 1

“YOU HAVE TOO MANY THINGS you hate, Reo.”

The young Reo furrowed his brows. “So? Got a problem with it?”

“I didn’t say that. But...”

Reo hated the rain, he hated the rich, he hated adults, he hated baths, he hated brand new T-shirts, he hated studying. Basically, he hated everything.

“Then what is it?” Reo demanded.

“I hate when you say you ‘hate’ things,” the other boy answered honestly.

Reo stiffened. Tears came spilling from his eyes. “Huh... Wha...?”

“Reo?! Are you hurt?!”

“I-I don’t know...” Confused, he clawed at his chest. “It hurts right here... O-ouch. That hurts, Mabu!”

“Sorry.” Mabu, desperate to stop Reo’s tears, scrubbed at the other boy’s face with more force than he intended. The area around Reo’s eyes was turning red. “Reo, let’s make a promise.”

“A promise?”

“A promise not to say the word ‘hate’ anymore.”

“What kind of promise is that?” muttered Reo.

“I don’t want to hear that you hate everything, and I don’t want to see you cry. So let’s just stop saying the word ‘hate’ from now on.”

Exasperated, Reo finally agreed. “Okay, fine. But, just so you know, I would never use that word for you, Mabu.” The two exchanged a pinky promise with

their tiny fingers.

Such was the dream of a day long past.

Asakusa's streets were empty late at night, nothing like the hustle and bustle of the afternoon. An ominous aura emanated from exit eight of Asakusa Metro, which led to an underground shopping district. A sign hung above the entrance, boasting an adorable otter mascot character called Otter Boy-kun. It shone so brightly that the image seemed to imprint itself on the eyes.

This underground shopping district was Japan's oldest. The Showa period had had a lasting impact on the architecture of the bar quarter, where something was currently taking place.

"It's hot. Can't we stop yet?"

Between the saccharine scent of something baking and the steam that permeated the air, it was difficult to breathe inside the dimly lit establishment. The heat of the gas burner illuminated the side of Mabu's face, giving it an eerie, pale silhouette that glowed in the dark.

A clear, deep voice whispered in his ear. "Odd-er... Don't you think it's a bit too soon?"

"But I can't stand it anymore," said Mabu.

"Odd-er... You never have any self-restraint."

"Please...don't tease me...!"

"If you're going to complain, then try doing it yourself," the otter urged. Its tone seemed to indicate it saw right through Mabu.

Ga-chang! There was a clang as metal clapped against metal, and a puff of steam shot up into the air.

"Aah..."

"Odd-er. See, I told you. It was too early."

"My apologies." Mabu's gaze was fixed on the ningyo-yaki. The little baked doll cake failed to maintain its form, its batter collapsing. How many times had

he failed now?

As if satisfied that the result was just as it had foreseen, the red shadow seemed to smile as it brushed its own hand over Mabu's white one. "Odd-er. It seems some fine-tuning is in order. Let me see inside your body again."

"Please, I want to become the person he's hoping for. Quickly." Maintenance was a matter of life or death for Mabu.

"Mabu. My poor, beautiful doll."

As Mabu lay on a table, the shadow slid its practiced hands over his chest. Unable to endure it, he closed his eyes.

The hands that touched his hollow heart—to whom did they really belong?

It was a sunny morning, and Asakusa TV was playing in the Asakusa Otter Police Box. Reo carried a strainer full of boiled broccoli over to the table. Steam was still rising off of them as he cheerfully dished them into his bowl of instant yakisoba.

"Heh heh heh, and now my perfect breakfast is ready~!♪" Reo customized his yakisoba by layering broccoli over it until the noodles were barely visible, then blanketing the whole thing in a gratuitous helping of mayonnaise. "Now to dig in."

"Thank you for the food."

Reo quirked an eyebrow at the other man. "Huh?" He peered over at Mabu, who similarly was eating his own bowl of instant yakisoba, and clumsily clicked his tongue. "Knock it off. There's no point in you eating that."

"Thanks to that last round of maintenance, I can eat now." But being capable of eating and actually enjoying the food were two completely different things. Mabu's pale face as he chewed was outright painful to watch.

"Fine." Reo acquiesced. "And? You think you'll win my approval by showing me that you can eat my favorite food?"

Mabu swallowed after much difficulty, bits of food still plastered to the sides of his mouth. He listened to Reo's words with a blank look in his eyes.

“You can dress it up to look as realistic as you like, but it doesn’t mean anything. Everything that comes from you is a lie.”

A lie. A fake. Empty. A doll. Those were all words Mabu heard many times before.

“Regardless, there’s someone I care about, and that makes things like this important to me,” said Mabu.

“Yeah, yeah, I know all too well who it is you really care about.”

As Reo spat back at him, Mabu lifted his face. “Reo, I...”

“Enough. More importantly, don’t say anything about what you saw yesterday. Not even to that precious, precious otter of yours.”

“...Okay.” Mabu’s reply echoed hollowly in the refreshing morning sunlight.

Scene 2

“THANKS FOR THE delicious meal!” Kazuki and Haruka’s voices echoed together in the Yasakas’ living room.

Ever since they rescued Haruka from the grip of the Otter Empire, Kazuki managed to finally return to his old self. The experience must have been terrifying for Haruka, so they asked Keppi to erase the memory from his mind—scrubbing it away like so much gunk on a plate. Meanwhile, Kazuki and his friends could still remember the struggle in great detail.

Kazuki slipped his arms through the sleeves of his blue-bordered summer clothing for the first time in a long time, and then said good morning to his family in the living room. They sat around the table to eat breakfast together, surrounded by the warm scent of happiness.

Sara’s dreamy voice droned on from the television. “Well then, have a wonderful day, and may you have lots of luck dished your way! ☆”

The summer sun cast a refracted reflection on the surface of the Sumida River. Nyantaro meowed as she chowed down on Fishtopia.

“Kazu-chan, there’s something I need to give you.” Haruka was perched on the embankment wall as he rummaged through his pocket. He produced the sachet that belonged to Kazuki’s mother. “That day, she said to give it to you.”

“Could you keep it for me, Haruka?”

“What? But...”

“Right now, I just want to be connected to the people closest to me,” Kazuki explained. He didn’t intend to discard his past, which was why he wanted Haruka to keep it for him.

“Am I included in that? And Mom and Dad too?” Haruka looked anxious.

Kazuki grinned back, as if to comfort him. “Yeah, do you even have to ask?”

He patted his younger brother's head.

"Ehehe, I'm glad to hear it!"

It was a casual moment of physical contact. Haruka had waited for this for so long.

"Got it? You only get to experience this summer once, so don't waste a moment of it! Laugh, cry, do backflips, whatever you want!" Otone's cheerful voice reverberated through the Asakusa Sara Junior High School classroom. "Let's make the most of it, whether we're playing games or doing homework! Yeaah!" She pumped her fist in the air, all kitted out for summer in her straw hat, bug-catching net, and watermelon pool floatie.

And with that, their end-of-term ceremony was at an end. Tomorrow, the long-awaited summer break would begin.

"It's been a long time since we did this," said Kazuki.

Enta replied, "You got that right."

The two boys were kicking a soccer ball at the base of the east end of the Azuma Bridge. Enta had defended this place on Kazuki's behalf and was still processing the joy he felt at them being able to play together. "Did you talk to my sister yet about rejoining the soccer team?"

"Yeah. I'll be joining you guys again next term." Kazuki had a bright look on his face as he spoke, not a single shadow in sight.

Enta was worried after everything that happened—Kazuki's cross-dressing being discovered at the handshake event, the secret of his birth parents being divulged when their consciousnesses joined in Sarazanmai, and then to top it all off, Haruka being kidnapped by the Otter Empire. But this summer promised to be a fun one.

"All right! Then let's get some special training in during break, just the two of us!" Enta channeled a bit too much enthusiasm as he kicked the ball, and it sailed in the wrong direction.

Kazuki chased it down to where it stopped at the riverbank. As he picked it

up, he noticed a silhouette on the red bridge above. “Toooooi!”

Toi paused mid-shuffle, unused to hearing his name called that way. He glanced down from the guardrail and spotted Kazuki waving at him.

“Heeey! Tooooooi! Come over here!”

“...You’re being chummy,” Toi commented. As usual, he was taken off guard by Kazuki’s friendliness—the way he slipped past all Toi’s walls. Seeing the soccer ball in Kazuki’s arms and the blue friendship bracelet around his right ankle, he seemed to guess what was going on. “You’re starting soccer again?”

Kazuki was so obstinate before about not playing. But memories of how they passed the Keppi-ball up to Kazuki so he could slam it in the goal and rescue his brother were still fresh in Toi’s mind. He noticed that Kazuki was smiling more than he had before. He also suspected that Enta, who long wished for the return of their Golden Duo, was probably over the moon in delight.

Toi used his feet to trap the ball that came flying at him, and then passed it to Enta.

The latter, who had something weighing on his mind for a bit now, decided to ask. “Hey, Kuji, you’ve played soccer before, haven’t you?” He noticed it when he lost that fight against those other boys here, and again when they kicked Keppi to each other at the Otter Empire HQ. Toi’s control was too good for him to be a total amateur.

“Eh, well, a little.”

What’s he acting all humble for? Enta wondered.

Beside him, Kazuki spoke up, “You’re too good for it to just be ‘a little.’ Oh, hey! Why don’t you join the team with us?”

“Huh?” Toi blurted out, surprised at the sudden invitation.

“You, Enta, and me. It’d be way more fun with the three of us! Right, Enta?”

“Yeah! With our teamwork, we could even aim for nationals, couldn’t we?”

Toi couldn’t quite keep up with their burgeoning enthusiasm. “No, I...”

“What, you don’t want to?” Kazuki asked, an innocent look on his face. He was oblivious to his own tendency to pull people into his schemes. Toi, however, had a hard time saying no to Kazuki—but at least he was somewhat aware of that.

“...I mean, I guess I could,” Toi answered finally. *Ah, here we go again*, he thought.

Enta had a big grin on his face when Toi looked over at him. “You act all distant, but you’re actually happy to join us, huh?”

It felt as if Enta had read him like a book, so when Toi returned the kick, he put all his power behind it. It slammed right into Enta’s face.

“Agyah!” he screeched. “You suck at kicking!”

“That was on purpose,” Toi told him.

“Be gentle on my glasses, okay?! You gonna pay for them if they break?!”

“*That’s* the part you’re pissed about?”

Kazuki burst into laughter.

Life had been so hectic recently, downtime like this was rare. In that moment, the boys were certain they would be able to continue playing soccer together, even as they transformed into kappa and fought zombies.

Scene 3

REO WAS SEATED inside the air-conditioned confines of the police box, the heat of the midsummer sun at his back. Mabu was gone today.

“If I can get those plates, everything will work out...”

He suddenly stood, muttering the words to himself as he held his hand out toward the wall. Glitchy static suddenly rippled across the ordinary green bulletin board, and just as quickly, a bright red otter mark appeared over it.

When Reo had the sudden impulse to turn that little kid into a Kappa Zombie earlier, some punks infiltrated their hideout and stole the child away. He was able to confirm the culprits’ identities via a monitor: three unfamiliar kappa and a round, white object that they bounced between themselves like a ball. That “ball” was the crown prince of the Kappa Kingdom. He fled during the war and was missing ever since.

Reo couldn’t forget that day—the day Mabu lost his life.

He awoke in a hospital room. The walls were pure white, with leaves patterned on the ceiling. At least, he assumed it was a hospital room because of the bed and the tube fed into his arm, leading to an IV drip beside him.

“Mabu!” Reo sprang upright, shouting for his partner on instinct. His head spun, dizziness overcoming him. Just how long had he been sleeping like this?

“How are you feeling?” The room seemed empty when he awoke, but now an eerie black shadow lingered at its edge.

“...Who are you?” Reo was at a disadvantage; his body didn’t move the way he willed it. In a bid to keep the shadow from inferring as much, he fixed them with a deadly glare.

“An otter. Specifically, the director general of the Otter Empire’s Science and Technology Agency. You were involved in an incident when the Kappa Kingdom was annihilated.”

Images flashed through his head—blazing flames, crumbling wreckage, and his one and only partner, Mabu—his eyes falling shut as Reo cradled him in his arms.

“Where’s Mabu...?!” Vivid memories came flooding back, of Mabu’s white hand in Reo’s as he said, *Don’t let go of your desires.*

“Odd-er...”

The otter seemed to disappear for a split second, before a light flipped suddenly on. The room adjacent to his, which was hidden by a darkened window, was now illuminated. The sight contained within stole Reo’s breath away.

“He sustained serious injuries. By the time we found him, it was already too late,” said the otter.

Reo pulled out the tube coiled around him and tripped over his own feet in his rush to the glass partition. Lying on the bed within was Mabu, looking as if he were in a deep sleep. Reo was sure that if he pressed his ear to the other man’s chest, he’d hear the gentle thrum of a heartbeat.

“Mabu! Wake up! Don’t you dare leave me behind, I won’t forgive you if you do! You hear me, Mabu?! This is utterly unbelievable. Tell me this is just some kind of dream...!”

“It’s otterly true. An unfortunate reality.”

As Reo hunched over, the otter’s voice rang unpleasantly loud in his ear. “Do you wish to save your partner’s life?”

“If you’re telling me I’d be able to hear Mabu’s voice again... I’ll do whatever it takes.” That was his answer, before the otter even asked the next question. Even knowing the suffering it would cause, Reo would give the same answer again.

Because we never really had a choice.

Scene 4

“H_{UH}...?”

The soccer ball fell out of Kazuki's hands, rolling away. The grating cry of cicadas filled his ears. Just ahead of where the ball came to a stop was a sight that left even Enta and Toi speechless. The training area, where they played soccer just the day before, was now a tragic scene. Kitchen waste, boxes, and empty cans were strewn about. Whoever the culprit was, they also brought paints and vandalized the boys' makeshift goalpost with a variety of colors.

Kazuki mumbled, “Our practice area...”

“This looks awful...” said Toi.

Enta also spoke up, “Who would do such a thing...?”

As they stood there, frozen, Toi was the first one to move.

“Toi?” Kazuki called after him.

Toi squatted down and picked up one of the cans, glancing back at the other two. “We're gonna do it, right? Soccer, I mean. The three of us.”

“You...” Enta was completely taken aback by Toi's actions.

Kazuki hurried over to the mountain of trash. “Yeah! Let's fix this together, the three of us!”

And so, their first day of summer vacation was spent picking up garbage. The three stopped to admire their work once it was all finished, satisfied with what they accomplished.

“Okay,” said Kazuki. “I'll see you guys tomorrow!”

Enta looked over at Toi. “Don't oversleep, Kuji.”

“Don't need to hear that from you.”

They promised to meet again the next day, and then parted ways.

“Systems are currently operating at 39% capacity.”

The plain, steel framework elevator was soaring upward.

“Otterly unbelievable...” responded a voice over the transmission.

Mabu kneeled in the elevator as he gave his report. Reo was nowhere to be seen. “It’s completely true. The Kappa Zombie reserve army has declined considerably. We’ve already hunted down and cleared out all the people in this city with strong desires.”

“Odd-er. That spells catastrophe for both you and your partner.”

“I am very well aware,” said Mabu.

“If you’re being otterly truthful, then show us proof of your loyalty. Now, have you any other changes to report?”

After a pause, Mabu answered, “No.”

“I have great expectations of you...Mabu.”

The transmission ended.

Mabu kept his promise.

Yasaka Kazuki had three habits that he refused to budge on. Everyone had habits like that, however big or small: things like eating taiyaki from the tail first, washing your arms first in the bath, or starting a mystery novel by reading the ending first. It didn’t matter if anyone else understood them; they were absolute and binding.

And so, Kazuki was currently holding a soccer ball in his hands. It was just a regular ball that you might find anywhere, a bit scuffed from use. Dressed in a striped summer outfit, cradling that ordinary ball in his hands as if it were something precious, he began to cross the great bridge that stretched out over the Sumida River.

“Good morning! ☆ Every day is happy! And with your lucky selfie, you’ll have even more happiness on your plate! It’s me, Azuma Sara, dish! ☆” There was a

Jumbotron located on the Matsuya department store, just ahead of the bridge he finished crossing, and from it drifted the sleepy-sounding voice of a girl. “Here we go, what will the item be for today’s lucky selfie?”

The girl on the monitor began to dance to a profoundly mysterious tune. This girl was Azuma Sara, a local idol hosting the program for her namesake, Asakusa Sara TV.

Kazuki kept walking, not missing a beat as he turned his back on Sara and continued on.

“Duh-dun! It’s a ball, dish! ☆ The more balls you have, the happier you’ll be! ☆” The roulette wheel she spun landed on a plate with the word “ball” written on it. “Okay then, have a wonderful day, and may you have lots of luck dished your way! ☆”

Ping!

His phone beeped with the sound of an incoming message. Stickers and messages began popping up one after the other in their group chat window.

Enta: 😞 I just woke up!

Toi: 😏 I’ll snap your plate in two!

Enta: 🙏 Sorry!

Although Enta was the one to warn them all against sleeping in, he was late today.

Kazuki: Enta will have to treat us to kappa croquettes! 😊

Kazuki grinned as he typed out that short message. Soon, the app indicated that both of them had read it, and what followed was a seemingly random exchange of stickers.

The fact that we transform into kappa and extract Kappa Zombies’ shirikodama is a secret to everyone. We’ve had a few close shaves, but the three of us are connected by Sarazanmai. I’m sure we’ll be okay, no matter what

happens.

Or at least, so he'd thought.

"Huh...?"

The ball fell from Kazuki's hands. The cicadas sounded even noisier today. Enta and Toi were speechless. The practice area they worked so hard together to clean was trashed once again. It looked even worse than it had yesterday.

Kazuki mumbled, "It can't be..."

"Again?" Toi grumbled.

"No way, not after we worked so hard to clean it!"

"Someone's trying to harass us." Toi concluded.

"What? Why us—?" Enta started to grumble back at the other boy.

"Again!" Kazuki interrupted. "Let's clean it again. We'll show them. We won't give up that easily!"

"Kazuki..." Enta stared back at him.

"...Yeah," agreed Toi.

Things moved quickly once their minds were made up.

"Okay! Let's dish out all we've got and clean this place up!" Enta swung his arms in a circle, stretching them, and then began collecting the garbage.

Toi was about to follow his lead when suddenly...

Brrr... Brrr...

His phone vibrated with an incoming call. He didn't have to check the screen to know who was calling. There was only one person in the world who would contact him like this.

"Sorry, I gotta take this." That was all he said before walking off.

"It's rare for Toi to talk on the phone," Kazuki noted casually as he watched Toi climb up the stairs.

"Gotta be his brother, right? I assume," said Enta.

“Oh, I guess so.”

“Kuji doesn’t seem to have much interest in making calls or sending messages, but he’s *always* hooked to his phone.”

“Really?” asked Kazuki. “Well, I kinda get that, though. I’m sure he’s always waiting.”

The two of them recalled Toi’s brother, whom they’d seen when the other boy’s secrets leaked in Sarazanmai. Those memories were from four years ago, so Chikai probably looked different now. Ever since the two learned the secret that was supposed to stay just between Toi and his brother, they avoided bringing up his family.

“Now come on!” said Enta. “Let’s get cleaning!”

“Okay!”

They rolled up their sleeves and started cleaning up the mountain of filth. There was even more garbage and graffiti than there had been yesterday, and it took a bone-breaking degree of effort to get it done between just the two of them.

“It’s just not coming off!” Enta cursed as he scrubbed furiously at a splatter of red paint plastered across the wall with his deck brush.

“We might not be able to get all of this off...” Kazuki, who was doing the same beside him, was beginning to get discouraged as well.

Just then, the two heard footsteps coming down the stairs above them. Kazuki noticed and stopped scrubbing. “Toi?”

“You’re late! Today’s croquettes are gonna be *your* treat!” said Enta.

“...Sure.” Toi’s response to Enta’s ribbing was half-hearted.

“Huh?” Enta blurted, confused.

“Sorry,” Toi said. “I won’t be able to play soccer with you guys anymore.”

For a moment, even the cicadas seemed to fall silent.

“The phone call was from my brother. That big job he had, it didn’t work out. You guys get it, right? It’s not a normal job. One mistake can be deadly. But my

brother's comrades betrayed him."

"No way..."

Toi slowly descended the steps. "Apparently, it's only a matter of time before the police have a warrant out for him. I'm going to meet up with my brother and leave this city. So...forget all that talk of me joining the soccer team." He traced his hand over the wall, still stained with streaks of paint.

The bright midsummer sunlight cast thick shadows at the base of the bridge, hiding the expression on Toi's face. Only fourteen years old, the boys didn't know what was appropriate to say at a time like this.

"I've been mentally preparing myself for this. It just means I can't put my past completely behind me."

Had Kuji Toi always been the type to make decisions without anyone else's input? It sounded like he'd given up on everything.

"Just one more," said Kazuki, his voice booming.

"Huh?" Toi glanced back.

Kazuki's eyes were full of intense determination. "The Wishing Plates! Just one more and we'll have five. Then we can help your brother!"

"Kazuki..." Enta was naturally shocked to hear that proposal coming from Kazuki, given that the latter had been collecting them for Haruka's sake up until now.

"If we do that, you won't have to leave anymore, right, Toi?"

"I-I guess."

"Well, then that's that! Right, Enta?"

"Yeah! Let's get that last plate for Kuji!"

Dazed, Toi stared blankly at the two boys as the sun glared overhead.

The three of them went to the shopping district to buy snacks. They ate as they walked, laughing over the fact that they'd spent the whole day cleaning again without being able to practice at all. When Toi tried to treat them both to

croquettes, they turned him down, saying, “Come on, we were just kidding about that.”

When Kazuki spotted a convenience store along the way, he popped inside to buy water for Keppi. As Enta watched him go, he commented, “That’s who Kazuki really is, you know. That’s how he was before Haruka’s accident. This is what I’ve been wishing for this whole time, for him to smile the way he used to.” His cheeks puffed out like a squirrel’s as he chomped down on his croquette.

As Toi watched, he remembered something that was worrying him earlier. Kazuki was still inside browsing, so he had some time. “You sure you’re okay with this?”

“Hm?”

“Weren’t you gathering those plates so you could make Kazuki’s wish come true?” As far as Toi could recall, all of Enta’s tears, laughter, and anger had been for Kazuki. Toi hadn’t known them for long, but even he could tell the two had a lot of history.

“What? Are you trying to be considerate? What’s next, are pigs gonna start flying?” Enta joked.

“Don’t mock me!”

“Okay, sorry, don’t get so mad!” Enta rummaged through the plastic bag he was holding as he answered the question. “Like you said, I still want to make Kazuki’s wish come true.”

“Then why—”

Enta interrupted Toi by holding a croquette in front of his face. “And! Right now, his wish is to help you!”

Toi gaped, unable to say anything.

“Get it? Then take this. Here!”

“...Thanks.” Toi hesitated before timidly reaching a hand out for the croquette, but his fingers swiped empty air.

“Nah, this feels too weird. I changed my mind!” Enta wore a triumphant smirk

as he held the treat just out of reach.

“You—I’ll run you through!” Toi roared.

“Ehehe!”

As the two of them bantered together, Kazuki stepped out of the store with cucumber-flavored Shirohasu water in hand. “Sorry to keep you guys waiting. Something happen?”

“Nope!” the two replied in unison. Enta grinned while Toi angrily bit into the croquette he managed to wrest out of the former’s hand.

Kazuki, chill as ever, seemed content to drop the matter.

“Ribbit, caution!”

Meanwhile, Keppi was busy patrolling Kappabashi’s main street. Or so it seemed from the outside, anyway. In reality, the crown prince of the Kappa Kingdom was currently in the middle of a date with Asakusa’s local idol, Azuma Sara. Since Keppi wasn’t human, however, it looked more like a woman cradling a creepy pet in her arms as she walked.

“We’ll correct the wrongs of this city today as we always do, ribbit.” He had a stiff expression on his face as he fixed his gaze on the kappa statue at the side of the street. The short, plump Keppi stretched his legs out and slapped a sticker on it that said “This is a kappa.”

“You’re *completely* amazing, dish! ☆”

Keppi’s gaze turned to another green statue often seen near drugstores. “This one...is NOT a kappa!” He slapped a sticker on it that read “This is a frog.”

“Ahh, you’re so *completely* dreamy, dish! ☆” His every action made Sara’s heart beat with adoration.

Keppi turned to her, his eyes earnest as he declared, “And this kappa... belongs to me and only me, ribbit...”

“I love you *completely*, dish! ☆” Sarah said before planting a kiss on the white, squishy mochi’s forehead (or, at least, the closest thing a creature like

Keppi could have to a forehead).

“We’re the best couple on earth, ribbit...”

The two were lost in their own little world as darkness began to descend.

Balls, balls...

Balls, balls...

Otter odd-er

Steal those balls

From a world otterly filled with lies

Steal the balls, balls

Rip open the heart of truth under dominion,

An imitation lies beneath the heat at your fingers

Don't let go of your desires

Our wish is for a night without end

Our first encounter is a morning that never begins

Wring out desire

Below the city, Reo and Mabu's ritual played out, unbeknownst to anyone else.

"Time for our next piece of news, dish! ☆ Soccer balls are flying through the air all over Asakusa. Balls are our friends! ☆" Asakusa Sara TV was reporting on the bizarre events occurring around the city with its usual devil-may-care attitude.

Kazuki and the others arrived at the Kappa Plaza, searching for Keppi.

"Hey, Keppi! We brought you a gift!"

"It's your favorite cucumber-flavored Shirohasu!"

But there was no answer when they called for him.

"Hey, look at this..." A cucumber lay at Toi's feet with teeth marks on it.

"Keppi's leftovers?" Enta questioned.

"He's too greedy with his food. He wouldn't leave his favorite snack behind like this," said Toi.

Kazuki stared at it for a moment before his head jerked up with a start. "Don't tell me something happened to him?!"

Suddenly, they heard a strange song drift behind them. "The two of us are a couple~!♪ The best couple~!♪" Keppi returned, clearly in good spirits.

"What the heck," mumbled Enta. "He's fine."

As he stepped into the plaza, Keppi's expression turned grave. "Hmph! I sense someone has infiltrated this place in my absence, ribbit...!"

"Huh?!"

"A burglar, ribbit!"

Keppi's prediction proved to be true. They opened the lid to a small underground compartment in the plaza and found...

“The Wishing Plates! They’re gone!” Kazuki gasped. The four plates they gathered and left in Keppi’s safekeeping had disappeared.

“This might be the work of the Otter Empire, ribbit.”

“Seriously?! Isn’t that real bad?” Enta asked in a panicked tone.

The soccer ball they’d left sitting on the floor behind them suddenly lifted into the air and began to float away. “Hey, my ball!” Kazuki shouted.

“Looks like we have another Kappa Zombie, ribbit.”

“No,” snapped Toi. “At a time like this?!”

Now that he was finally able to play soccer with Kazuki again, Enta wasn’t about to let a Kappa Zombie get in his way. There was no hesitation in his voice as he said, “Let’s forego getting the plates back right now and focus on getting the ball back first!”

A familiar force slammed into Enta’s bottom.

A rickshaw flew past the familiar Shinto shrines and shop fronts of Orange Street.

“Today’s zombie is a Ball Zombie.”

“Why’d you hit me first?! I didn’t even say *that* word!”

Keppi glanced at Kappa-Enta before pointing at the words on the shutters of the storefronts they passed. *Let’s forego getting the plates back right now.*

FoRegO Getting = FROG

Frog = Most humiliating insult ever

The letters on the metal shutters spelled out Enta’s mistake for him.

“Grrr, that’s a real stretch!” Enta’s indignation earned him a sympathetic look from Toi.

“Anyway, we can search for the missing plates after we defeat this Zombie!” Kappa-Kazuki said. They needed five silver plates to have a wish granted. They had no real choice but to defeat this Zombie first.

“Y-yeah! You’ve got a point!”

A Ball Zombie loomed above the Azuma Bridge’s Desire Field, a collection of soccer balls dotting its massive body. A red ball gag was tucked into the creature’s mouth. Judging by its appearance, today’s Zombie had some crazy desires.

“I’m so jealous of all the balls!” it roared. It didn’t sound like love, but envy.

Kappa-Enta scrambled recklessly, wriggling inside the Zombie’s sphincter, and clamped onto its shirikodama.

“We kappatured it!”

Inside the shirikodama, Enta saw a man dressed in a peculiar costume. A woman in a similar getup kicked him right in the crotch.

“You wanted to become a ball so she could kick you...!”

“Now you know the secret I couldn’t share with anyone!” The Zombie—who was once Tamayori Shikeru, his name currently spelled out with the kanji for *Please Kick Me Instead of Balls*—let out a final cry of agony as his monstrous body burst. “A cry from the ball pit of my heaaaaart!”

Keppi’s voice echoed around them. “Time for Sarazanmai, ribbit!”

“Saaaa!”

“Saaaa!”

“Saaaa!”

And then all together, “Sarazanmai!”

Enta hadn’t forgotten what Keppi told them: Sarazanmai connected their bodies and their hearts, which consequently meant sharing secrets you’d rather keep hidden. It felt strangely good to release yourself to that shared ocean of

consciousness, but he underestimated the strength of that connection. He thought his secrets would be safe as long as he wasn't the one leading the pack.

Unfortunately, he was wrong.

“Leaking.”

The first leak started exactly where he expected.

Night fell over the Azuma Bridge, and their practice area was deserted. A long shadow crept over the faded concrete goalpost. The person who peered back through that curtain of darkness was the same one who protected the space for so long—Enta himself.

He carried a large garbage sack in his hand, indiscriminately scattering trash all over the place. Then he started defacing the wall with frenzied strokes of his paintbrush.

Toi, who took the shirikodama next, was utterly confused.

“Why? Wasn't this place supposed to be precious to you?”

Even though they could see what was happening, Enta's emotions were such a tangled mess that it was impossible to isolate a single one of them. They couldn't even begin to comprehend what he was feeling. His emotions all wrapped up and knotted together in a snarl they couldn't hope to unravel.

Although he questioned Enta's reasoning, Toi suspected deep down that he was the reason Enta went to such extremes. It was conjecture on his part, impossible to confirm, but he felt terrified of how Kazuki would react once the shirikodama passed to him and he found out what Enta had done.

The leak continued, undisturbed by Toi's thoughts and anxiety.

Midnight fell on the Kappa Plaza. Just as before, Enta had a handkerchief tied around his head as he tiptoed inside. He headed straight for the innermost part of the plaza, where he knelt and reached for the lid to the underground

compartment. The four glimmering silver plates were still inside. He delicately lifted them free, a wicked expression on his face.

“Enta stole them...? Why?” Kazuki was shocked.

Enta, who could sense the other boy’s reaction, cried out, “Noooooooooooo! This is all because you wouldn’t stop fussing over Kuji!”

Ahh, why do people hold such desire in their hearts? Desire led me astray until I wasn’t myself anymore. Until I hurt someone else. I only wanted to give you something beautiful, if I could. You should have thrown me out along with the trash.

Scene 5

THE WAR BETWEEN the otters and the kappa had always been about energy. Although the Otter Empire had won, the Kappa Kingdom's resources would have run out sooner or later anyway. The otters revived Mabu under one condition: Reo had to work for them to find a new source of energy. In other words, Reo was to become their slave.

The otters had seen right through him—known Reo understood exactly what they were asking, and that that wouldn't stop him from agreeing. And sure enough, Reo didn't hesitate. He wanted to bring Mabu back to life.

Reo stood alone in a dark elevator. He'd finally been given approval to visit Mabu. Where was this elevator taking him, though? It seemed like an eternity passed before the doors finally opened. In the endless stretch between, he found himself wondering if there even *was* a top floor to this place.

He just wanted to bring this nightmare to an end.

Silvery white light stabbed into his eyes. It was almost as if he were standing among the clouds, here on the highest deck of the building. Before him was the very sight he'd seen over and over in his dreams. This was the moment he so longed for, and in his chest, a mass of conflicted emotions swelled like a storm.

I want him to glance back at me. No! Don't! Yes, look over at me. No, I don't want him to look! None of the words or feelings were less true than the others. Unable to shift his attention from the tempest within himself, Reo took each step one at a time.

"Reo."

He froze when he heard his name. That voice—the one he longed for—was exactly as he remembered it. The well-loved sound of it made his heart tremble.

"I must have worried you. I'm back to normal now, though."

The familiarity of that voice suddenly felt sharply, chokingly *wrong*. This man

with the same body, the same voice, he— “Who...are you?” Reo asked.

“I’m Mabu. Your partner.”

A strong gust of wind rushed between them.

“No! You’re not the Mabu I remember! Mabu never had that kind of look on his face!”

“The technological ingenuity of the Empire is awe-inspiring. Their recreation of my personality was flawless,” the man continued.

“No, something’s utterly wrong here! I don’t believe it!”

As if it was waiting for him to speak those very words, the otter appeared and said, “It’s otterly true. We’ve implanted a mechanical heart inside of him. We’ll need your help to keep it functioning.”

“What...?”

“If you don’t like it, then just stop his heart...with your own hand,” the otter goaded.

“Are you...telling me to kill Mabu a second time?!”

Mabu’s words replayed in his mind. *Don’t let go of your desires.* Now, as Reo struggled in anguish, the very person who’d spoken those words sat in front of him, regarding him coolly.

The otter’s voice rang out high and loud, almost like a birthday celebration. “An otter joke. As of today, you two will be sent to the human world. We’ll be sending along something else we swiped from the Kappa Kingdom. The embodiment of hope for the Empire’s future.”

A roar reverberated. Something began lifting itself out of the ground, as if it were rising up from the pits of hell.

“D-d-d-d-d-d-darkness!”

Plate 8:

Candy

Scene 1

MY OLDER BROTHER threw away everything that mattered to me. So I decided to throw away what I treasured the most too.

It was winter, four years ago.

The Azuma Bridge was bathed in the light of dusk as a ball plummeted over the guardrails and splashed into the river below. It swayed precariously with the river's rhythm, a bobbing sphere protruding from the surface. A ten-year-old Toi leaned over the guardrail and watched from above.

"Why are you throwing that away?"

Toi froze for a moment, thinking that he was being scolded. But when he looked, he spotted a child about the same age as him down by the riverside, peering up at him.

"Do you hate soccer now?" the boy asked.

Toi replied, "No, but I have to throw it away to survive." Not that explaining it would do him any good; the other boy wouldn't understand. Toi didn't particularly want him to, either.

The boy mumbled, as if speaking to himself, "I wonder if that was the case for me too... I don't have ties to anyone."

Toi was too young to understand what such cryptic language might mean. Still, he got the impression that the two of them were similar in that they'd both lost something. "No one realizes the bonds they have until they're gone," he told the boy. That was an understanding he'd come to ever since his parents' death. "I have to protect the only family I have left now. So...I've got to ditch soccer."

That was the strength of his determination, born from the promise he made himself after everything that happened the night of the shooting. No longer would he be selfish.

He crumpled something in his hand and whipped his arm through the air as hard as he could, sending it in an arc over the edge of the railing. The blue friendship bracelet landed snugly in the waiting hands of the boy below.

“I’m giving you this!” said Toi.

Giving it away, throwing it away—it didn’t matter, as long as he was rid of it. Although his own childhood wish didn’t seem likely to come true.

“If it breaks, it’s supposed to grant the wearer a wish!” he shouted again, striking the same dramatic pose that used to encourage him so much. He would leave that pose, his sentimentality, and everything else behind.

There’s no way he remembers...right?

After that, Toi and his brother left Asakusa, passed from one distant relative to the next. There was a period during that time when he couldn’t even go to elementary school. Still, no matter how much his surroundings changed, he always had a futon to sleep on and three meals a day. Behind the scenes, he had to wonder... How much had his brother had to prostrate himself? How far had he soiled his hands, just to ensure they both had food to eat? Thinking about it only strengthened Toi’s sense of urgency.

Toi had forgotten about those memories, at least until he returned to this city, got wrapped up with those two troublemakers, turned into a kappa, and finally saw the blue friendship bracelet he’d given Kazuki all those years ago with his own eyes.

A carefree voice drifted to his ears from above. “Guess this is our last look at this place.”

“Brother!”

Chikai stepped from the water bus stop, clad in his usual dark suit. “Yo. Sorry I had to make you come out here so early in the morning.” He sounded as

indifferent as ever, which only fanned the flames of Toi's anxiety.

"Is everything okay? What happened?"

"Dunno. But it looks like they probably sniffed out what happened four years ago."

Toi stiffened at those words, a reflexive response to being reminded of what he'd done.

"Hm? Don't tell me you think it's your fault that this is happenin'?"

"Not exactly..."

"Tch. When are you finally gonna let me take care of everything?"

Never—Toi could say that much with certainty. His brother had said that knowing full well that Toi would never let himself need too much from Chikai. Toi knew best of all what would happen if he took his brother's words at face value.

"You're doin' good." Chikai wasted no time extending his large hand toward Toi, mussing the hair atop his sweaty forehead. Toi raised his eyes, determined to complain this time, but when he did, he was met with a piercing, earnest look from his brother. "But don't forget. Just like you need me, I need you, too."

Don't take his words at face value, he reminded himself.

"Come with me, Toi."

But it's not like it'll kill me to believe what he says, either.

"Brother..."

Everything he wanted up until now—everything he begged for—was being lined up right in front of his very eyes. He'd be a fool not to take it. He knew that, and yet...

"Hm? What's wrong?" Chikai asked.

He didn't want to ruin his brother's mood. "...I'd like a little bit of time," he said.

"Huh?"

Panicked, Toi added, “No, don’t get the wrong idea! I *am* going with you. My mind’s already made up about that. But there’s a couple of guys that need me right now and...” The right words simply wouldn’t come out. There was no way he could hope to persuade his brother like this.

Or so he thought.

“Bwahah! I haven’t seen you with that kinda look on your face in a long time.”

“Wha...?!” Toi was frantic, and yet his brother was laughing at him. He felt both embarrassed *and* annoyed, but it had been a long time since he’d seen his brother laugh like this.

“Okay, okay. I’ll wait for ya. But just one day.” By the time Chikai said those last words, all traces of laughter evaporated.

Scene 2

THERE WAS AN OLD Smart Ball arcade just a short walk from Asakusa's Sixth Ward's five-way intersection, in the direction of Hanayashiki. Enta was inside it, grumbling to himself. The arcade was run by his grandmother as a sort of hobby, but its retro look made it popular with residents and sightseers alike. Today, it was bustling with customers.

"Kazuki, that jerk! Why's he gotta blame me for everything, huh?! Who's more important anyway, me or Toi?!" Enta was sporting a yellow cap on his head and a lollipop stick protruding from his mouth—one of the prizes he won. He yanked roughly at the levers on the game tower.

It was only the third day of summer break, and his mood couldn't have been worse. His misdeeds were revealed during the previous night's secret leak, but he was loathe to remember what happened afterward. Suffice to say that he and Kazuki had had a huge fight, hence his current state of despair.

Each of the blue balls he released gradually sank down into the gutter. Enta was a run-of-the-mill player, but playing half-heartedly and randomly pounding the controls quickly drained all of the balls he had. He turned the levers, only to realize he lost, and then started cursing.

"What? *Already*? Ugh, see?! Nothing ever goes right!"

Suddenly, a man's large hand appeared in front of him, a ball pinched between his thumb and forefinger. "If nothing's going right, just throw it all away." He dropped it into the slot on the machine. "Life is a make-it-or-break-it game."

Ga-thunk.

"You can change out balls, but you only get one life, so..." He smoothly pulled the lever, sending the ball bouncing until it landed gracefully in the highest scoring hole. The prize tray filled up with an enormous number of balls.

"Incredible!"

“Right?” The man looked triumphant.

When Enta looked back at the stranger, he let out a small squeak of alarm.

“Hm? Somethin’ on my face?”

Beneath the visor of his hat, Enta could clearly see Toi’s older brother. His face was mostly unchanged from the way Enta had seen it in Toi’s memories, but the sinister aura around him had grown stronger.

“No, nothing! Oh yeah, as thanks, here...” Enta held out one of the lollipops he brought with him, hoping to distract Chikai from realizing Enta recognized him. He trembled, wondering if the man might get angry at him for being patronizing by offering such a thing.

“Oh, good. I just ran out actually. Looks like helpin’ people has its benefits.” To Enta’s surprise, Toi’s brother looked delighted at the gift. But then his fierce features took a frightening shift as he spotted the two silhouettes loitering outside. Chikai clicked his tongue, making Enta flinch in fear.

The two silhouettes belonged to the police officers Reo and Mabu.

“So this is the leader of the group of swindlers from Tama... This is balls. Why do we gotta find him?” Reo grumbled, glancing down at the file in his hands with disinterest.

“They told us about this at the emergency summons briefing. This is the suspect’s birthplace. There is a good chance he might pass through here,” Mabu replied, reaffirming the necessary details of the case.

“Uh-huh. And?”

“He’s the suspected culprit of that shooting four years ago. If we arrest him, it’s a guaranteed Kappa Zombie.”

“Hmph.” Reo scoffed. “For a defective puppet, you sure are desperate to earn their goodwill.”

This was the kind of disparagement Mabu came to expect from Reo. It was a daily occurrence. Reo could sense his partner’s pensive silence, but when he lifted his eyes, he saw a wooden box being held out toward him. Inside were

three adorable otter-shaped ningyo-yaki.

“You think I’m going to listen to you if you give me stuff like this?” Reo scoffed. If so, this “Mabu” was certainly underestimating him. Despite that, Reo hated to let food go to waste. He decided to test one, snapping off a piece with his teeth.

“Urgh! It’s still raw.”

“I-It seems to be clear.” Enta and Chikai peered out from the rear of the Smart Ball Arcade.

The two looked conspicuous with their backs pressed to the wall, gliding sideways down the back alley with the noon sun glaring down from above. They stopped once they reached the main street, which was crowded with sightseers. They would draw too much suspicion, walking like that.

“Phew, thanks for that. You know this area pretty well?” Chikai asked. Judging by the way he walked up ahead, he was just as familiar with the roads.

“When I was young, I played around here a lot with Kazu—uh, my friend.”

“Everything seems to have changed. The city *and* the people.”

Enta finally managed to blurt, “So, um, did you do something? Something bad?”

“Is that what it looks like?”

“Uhh, well...”

Chikai burst into laughter. “Bwa ha ha, I figured as much.”

“Uh-huh...”

It was impossible to respond to the man seriously. Enta knew someone else like that—someone who lived with him, in fact.

“Hey, four-eyes,” Chikai called teasingly. “How old are you?”

“Uh, I’m fourteen.”

“You sure are short for bein’ fourteen.”

“Oh, lay off!” Enta fumed.

Amused, Chikai just put more distance between the two of them. “Ha ha, my bad. I just have a brother the same age as you, that’s all.”

“...I know.”

“Not very cute, either. Tries to act all mature, maybe ’cause I’ve neglected him for so long.”

Enta could imagine Toi trying to act tough in front of his brother, standing tall with his chest puffed out.

“I’m gonna take him with me and blow this city. Can’t let the cops catch me now.”

“Um...” Enta’s lips moved before he could consider what he was saying. “If you’d like, I can help you out...!”

“Hm?” Chikai blinked back at him.

“Enough! Just grow up already. If you apologize first, it’ll be easier for Jinnai to say he’s sorry, too.”

“No! Why do I have to apologize to Enta?!”

He really is stubborn, thought Toi. *Not that I didn’t already know that.*

The two were in the Kappa Plaza, where Toi was making a concerted effort to persuade Kazuki. It was working about as well as he predicted, and he sighed in frustration.

“Doesn’t it piss you off too, Toi? If he hadn’t sabotaged us, we’d have already granted your wish by now!”

“Well, I mean...uhh...”

Kazuki slammed a fist against the ground, making it clear that his anger was genuine. “Enta, you jerk, I totally misjudged you! I can’t believe you lied to us and betrayed us like that!”

Although he did think the other boy was a pain, somewhere deep inside, Toi felt relieved. Kazuki was (correctly) directing his anger at Enta. If he’d still been

as oblivious and detached as before, he might have asked if it were some kind of joke (as with the kiss), and the two would've never even fought. The fact that they were clashing like this was proof that they were growing. Granted, if the secret leaking never occurred, then none of this would have ever happened.

"He's got his reasons," said Toi. "Listen to what he has to say."

"What 'reasons'?"

"Uh, it's not really my place to say." Toi wasn't so unprincipled that he'd divulge someone's romantic feelings. But even the best of intentions could backfire.

"What the heck? Are you guys keeping secrets from me? Why are you taking his side anyway?!"

"All I'm trying to say is—" Toi started to explain.

"Enough! I'll find the plates myself!" Kazuki slung those words at him, and then dashed out of the plaza.

Don't just snap at me and take off before our conversation's over! It was just like Kazuki to do that, too. Toi was exasperated. "I'm no good at this kinda thing."

Regardless, if there was something he could do, no matter how impossible, he wanted to try.

The weight of his backpack suddenly felt heavier.

Toi tried visiting Enta's house, but no one was home. Now that he stopped to think about it, he realized there was a pattern to the way they'd met up so far. Kazuki would always drag Toi into trouble, and Enta would always chase after the two of them.

As he passed before the Kaminarimon, a familiar face appeared on the Jumbotron. "Time for our next piece of news, dish! ☆ A warrant has been issued for the leader of the despicable group of conmen, SHIKOTAMA. Police believe the suspect, twenty-five-year-old Kuji Chikai, may be hiding out in Asakusa. They will therefore be conducting an emergency deployment of

officers around the area. Arrest him, arrest him! ☆”

A picture (taken god-knew-when) of Chikai’s disinterested face peered back at Toi through the screen.

“Tch. We’re out of time...” Toi took off running.

Behind him, an eerie voice could be heard shrieking in laughter. “Kwaaaah!”

Scene 3

FOR THE FIRST TIME in Jinnai Enta's life, he was participating in something criminal. Granted, he had no way of knowing that helping a criminal escape was legally classified as "aiding and abetting."

The wanted man and his accomplice were currently in Asakusa's Sixth Ward, at a hundred-yen store. A bizarre, airy song was playing on repeat inside the store, where variety goods and candy were stacked high on the shelves.

"Hey, kid, you want some candy?" Chikai asked. "Potato chips or chocolate, you can get whatever."

"No, *this* is what we need!"

"The heck is that?" Chikai said. But, with a shrug, he went ahead and tossed the plastic package Enta shoved at him into their shopping basket.

"It's a kappa!"

"A kappa mask!"

Enta stood in the middle of Asakusa's Sixth Ward's five-way intersection. A heartwarming scene was playing out before him.

"Okay, which of you kappa want a cucumber? Raise your hand!"

"Me! Me!" The children surged in like a wave. The man at their center was the same person whose picture and name were all over the news right now, though he was currently wearing a kappa mask. It was a pretty good idea to disguise him and take him somewhere safe.

But why, of all things, did I pick a kappa costume?

Enta never imagined Keppi's bad influence would manifest here. Fortunately, it was summer break. There were numerous children's events underway in the Sixth Ward. There were other adults passing out pickled cucumbers on sticks to people. The moment Chikai spotted them, he immediately joined the crowd

and blended in. His expression was impossible to read behind the mask, but his hands were gentle as he handed out cucumber treats and patted the tops of children's heads. Even when one of the more mischievous of the bunch slammed a kick into the back of his knees, Chikai just laughed it off. "Ouch, that hurts. I'll run you through, you brat!"

"Is he even serious about running away?" Enta wondered aloud. He chewed on a pickled cucumber as he watched, somehow uncomfortable with the thought of trying to stop Chikai.

The sign read "Entry today is limited to brothers and sisters! ☆ Strengthen your bonds in our bee ninja bonanza! Brothers and sisters only!"

Enta and Chikai decided to take advantage of another event to stay hidden, this time at Hanayashiki. Understandably, they turned down the option to dress as bee ninja. The staff was much less insistent this time, thanks to Chikai's intimidating presence.

"Been a long time since I've been to Hanayashiki," said Chikai.

"I'm just glad the staff believed us when we said we were brothers." Under his breath, Enta murmured, "Even though we don't look anything alike..." while licking at his ice cream cone.

Chikai seemed to be in a generous mood, treating Enta to something at every opportunity. It didn't seem financially sound, given that the man's latest job fell through (according to Toi), but Enta couldn't bring himself to say anything. He was smart enough to know not to ask, so he just gratefully accepted Chikai's charity.

The man in question was currently sipping on a Hanayashiki limited-run Marijuana Drink. A ridiculous name for any product. "The last time I was here, my brother kept calling after me, chasing me. He sure has changed a lot without my even realizing it."

They were seated on a bench in the rooftop garden, overlooking Bee Tower with its candy houses floating in the air. There was a four-person family in one, with two parents and two boys.

“He’s hesitating right now over whether he should choose his buddies or me. He’s never really gotten along with anyone before.”

“B-buddies...?” Enta was a little taken aback. It was the first time he ever heard anyone else objectively discuss the three of them.

Chikai continued, “Well, it’s my own fault. I’m the one who made him abandon what was most important to him...”

Evening light illuminated the Azuma Bridge as a brown paper bag flew over the edge of the rail and into the river below. *Plunk!* There was a loud splash as it broke the surface of the water, but soon it sank out of view.

“Now it’s over,” said Chikai. “Forget about the gun. Got it?”

The gun they received from Yuri Kamome—the one Toi had used to kill him—was at the bottom of the river.

“...Got it. You go on ahead, Brother,” Toi mumbled in a hollow voice.

“Kay.”

With the evidence destroyed, there was no reason for them to linger. Chikai hummed to himself as he walked away, but moments later, he heard another quiet splash. He turned around to see that his little brother had dumped the soccer ball he’d been carrying into the river.

“You sacrificed everything for me,” Toi said. “So I’m also going to throw away what matters most to me!”

That was Chikai’s first glimpse at the strength of his younger brother’s resolve.

Chikai still had a folder on his smartphone with old pictures of Toi. He pulled up one of his little brother striking a pose, back when he was part of the neighborhood soccer team. Back then, Toi didn’t have an edge to his voice like he did now.

He showed the photo to Enta. “He used to talk about how he wanted to be a

soccer player in the future, but he abandoned the game entirely.”

“Wait... No... It can’t be... This friendship bracelet...” Enta casually glanced at the photo, only to freeze when he noticed the blue friendship bracelet tied around Toi’s right ankle. There was a pitiful, wet plop as his ice cream splattered across the ground.

“Hm? Ah, yeah, I guess he gave it away. Kid, you dropped your cone.”

“Who?! Who did he give it to?!” Enta dropped all pretense and demanded answers.

Chikai just stared back blankly. “I don’t have a clue. I bet he just wanted someone to remember him—remember how much he loved soccer.” He slipped his phone into his breast pocket and glanced up at the sky. “That kid’s pretty serious at heart. Too serious. He’ll do anything for me without batting an eyelash, even if it’s dangerous or underhanded. Not like I ever asked him to, though.”

“I’ve done the same. I’ve done whatever I could for Kazuki, but...!”

“Hm?”

Enta kept his eyes lowered as he stood up, hands clenched at his sides. “It doesn’t matter how much you devote yourself to someone. If they never even think about your feelings, it’s all pointless.” His hand grasped at the wire fencing in front of him, trembling.

“You’re the one who gets to decide whether you want to devote yourself to someone or something. Wouldn’t it be easier for you to just quit?”

There was no compassion in Chikai’s words; he was a stranger and had no emotional investment in this situation. Besides, Enta knew that quitting wouldn’t make anything easier for him.

Suddenly, he spotted two people down below. “Those are...”

Reo and Mabu were patrolling the interior of the Hanayashiki park.

“The sign said ‘siblings only.’ You can’t tell me the two of us look even remotely like siblings trying to bond,” grumbled Reo.

“They probably only let us in because we’re policemen.” Mabu’s entirely-too-stiff-and-proper answer spoiled any humor Reo found in their situation.

“Thanks for the brilliant analysis, Sherlock.” Reo looked bored as he bit into his ningyo-yaki.

Chikai slipped over Hanayashiki’s blue wall, landing squarely in the alley behind the park. “Hup...!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa... Gaaah!” Enta had good reflexes but terrible luck. He tripped over his own feet and slammed his face into the pavement.

“Might be about time to leave,” Chikai remarked as they walked along.

Enta agreed. “Yes, please hurry, get your brother and get out of here!”

“Kwaaaaah!” An eerie battle cry sounded behind them.

“Huh?” The two looked back to find a man with a shaved head, save for the fine designs chiseled into the remaining bristles. The man sported glasses, a mustache and beard, and a tailored black suit. His entire getup screamed “thug.”

“Chikaaaai!”

“Wh-who the heck is that?!” demanded Enta. It was obvious that he and Chikai knew each other, though you could tell by the tension in the air that they weren’t friends.

Chikai stared at the man, then mumbled, “Yasu this time?” And then, “Ah, shit...”

“I’m here to avenge my bro!” The man whipped out a dagger from his pocket, drew it from its sheath, and began charging toward them. “Kwaaaaah!”

“Huh? What?! What the?!”

What do we do, what do we do?! Enta’s brain was spinning. This is like straight out of one of Grandma’s yakuza films!

He felt something slam into him from behind. For a moment, he almost wondered if Keppi was at it again, but realized it was Chikai’s foot. “Geh!” Enta

went stumbling toward the bald guy, arms splayed out and chest flung forward, until the blade was just a few centimeters away. He let out a strangled cry and yanked himself back.

Yasu, as Chikai called him, sneered. “What’s goin’ on?”

“Retreat, retreat, retreat, retreat...!” Chikai left the two behind and was dashing down the street.

“What?! Seriously? H-hold on!”

“Hey, kid. You in league with Chikai?!” Yasu snatched Enta up by the collar and pressed his face uncomfortably close.

“N-no!” Enta was bending the truth a little, but it wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Don’t play games with me! I know today’s the brother-and-sister-only event here! What’ve you got to say for yourself, huh?!”

Enta shrank back from the dagger as it slowly drew closer. Then suddenly...

“Stop, or we’ll call the police!”

It was a line heard frequently in television dramas and movies.

I’m saved! Enta thought as he whipped his head to look back at the very same officers he’d seen just moments ago in Hanayashiki.

“We *are* the police,” pointed out the uniformed man in glasses.

“Yeah, but the scene’s not complete without that line, right?” remarked the blond beside him. The former—Mabu—appeared to be struggling to understand why someone wearing a law enforcement uniform would need to call for the police.

“He’s just a kid,” said Mabu. “What are you doing to him?”

Reo added, “Also, weapons like that are against the law, you know?”

Yasu didn’t seem intimidated by their appearance at all. “Kwaaaaah! The reason I’ve kept going this long is so I can finish off Chikai!”

Yasuda Yasu was an underling of Yuri Kamome, who was murdered four years ago. He was the one to restore order to the YURIKAMOME gang after it lost its boss. He was a sentimental man as well, and lived with the promise of

vengeance in his heart for four years.

“No, no, no, no, no...!” Enta managed to wriggle free of Yasu’s grasp and scramble desperately to some nearby trees for cover. Once he was out of harm’s way, he peered out to watch how the scene unfolded.

“Chikai... Do you mean the wanted man, Kuji Chikai?” Mabu asked, not expecting to find information on their target here of all places.

“Like I’d hand him over to the cops! He’s gotta pay for what he did to my bro!” Yasu was too agitated to listen.

“How sentimental,” Reo remarked mockingly.

“Seems like Kuji got away.” Mabu said. The two lost interest.

“Quit flappin’ your mouths! Kwaaaah!” Unable to tamp down his rage, Yasu charged the two officers. His attack was easily foiled when Reo stuck out his foot to trip the lumbering thug, pitching him forward. When he regained his balance and glanced back, the two were staring coldly down at him.

“Don’t get in our way.”

“Not an ideal place to do this, but whatever.” Reo slipped his gun out of its holster.

“I’m not gonna fall for your empty threats, kwaaaah!” Yasu, who missed his opportunity to pull back, readied his weapon and leaped forward.

“Now, let us open a door. Is it desire, or love?” The sign on the gun changed from *Extraction* to *Attack*.

“Kwaaaaaaah!”

BANG!

A single bullet blasted through the top of Yasu’s head.

“Kuu...waah...” Smoke rose from his forehead as he flopped back onto the ground, motionless.

“Oh, no, no, no no...” Enta, who watched from the shadows of the trees as the whole thing played out, trembled as he ran from the scene.

“What should we do about this?” Reo asked.

“He’ll make a good Kappa Zombie,” replied Mabu. “We can’t let him go to waste.”

“I figured you’d say that! Then *you* carry him back,” Reo retorted childishly. There was something disquieting about how casually they talked while staring at the corpse before them.

“Was that the sound of a gunshot just now?!”

“Someone’s collapsed on the ground!” Two men—actual police officers who’d been on patrol—rushed over.

“Well, heck,” mumbled Reo. “We’ve been found out.”

The two men examined the body, turning pale as they asked, “Are you two the ones who shot him?!”

“One shot right through the head... No one’s going to buy that this was self-defense!”

“Hey! We’re talking to you! Answer us.”

Reo grinned at them.

Suddenly, one of the two officers blurted out, “The one who shot him was Kuji Chikai.”

“What? What are you on about all of a sudden?” demanded his partner.

“This man’s had a grudge against Kuji since the incident that happened four years ago.”

“Yeah, exactly,” agreed Reo. “Kuji’s the obvious culprit here.”

The one man regarded his partner—and the unfamiliar young men in uniform in front of him—skeptically. “What proof do you have of—”

Mabu flicked a small pin at him. It had the symbol of a heart on it, and it landed squarely on the officer’s chest, where it seemed to gleam in the light.

“Let’s clarify,” said Mabu. “Who murdered this man?”

The older officer answered after a short pause, “It was Kuji Chikai. I’m absolutely certain.”

Reo cackled. “Now, while you’re at it, why don’t you carry this body for us?”

At the Kaminari 5656 Kaikan’s Tokiwa Hall, darkness hung like a curtain with only a bright spotlight to illuminate the stage.

“I’ve been observing these men for the past couple of days. I’m certain they are the ones holding Dark Keppi-sama captive.”

Images in a slideshow depicted two beautiful men working at the Asakusa Otter Police Box. There were photos of them eating yakisoba, drinking tea with Enta’s grandmother, searching for lost cats, and finally, shooting a yakuza.

“I never dreamed the two of them were still alive, ribbit...” Keppi watched each slide with disbelief.

Sara, who was seated beside him, suddenly stood. She spoke like a host on a TV shopping channel, showing off a new product. “And this is our Super-Secret Anti-Otter Weapon, dish. ☆”

The spotlight onstage illuminated the item in question.

“What does it do?”

“With the press of a single switch, we can freeze our enemies into a block of ice and capture them alive, dish! ☆”

This was one of the Kappa Kingdom’s most convenient devices. It was nearly identical to a machine made to keep beer nice and cold during the summer.

“Very well. First, we should confirm their location, ribbit.” Grateful for his betrothed’s talent, Keppi began fiddling with the display screen of the weapon.

“You can’t fight on an empty stomach! ☆” Sara took a break to have some of Kappa Ken’s cucumber ramen delivered. One of the options was a bowl with an entire cucumber on top. She began adding extra pepper to it to accent the flavor. “Pepper, pepper—ack!”

Almost predictably, the lid to the shaker fell off, dumping the spice all over.

The resulting puff of smoke tickled at her nose, and Sara sneezed so hard that her foot went swinging through the air, slamming right into her beloved prince.

The door to the Super-Secret Anti-Otter Weapon swung open and poor Keppi went tumbling inside.

“Eek! My prince?!”

Gwooooooom!

The machine rumbled, and the prince was jostled around inside. A few moments later, the lid opened and sent him flying back out in a cloud of chilly mist.

Crackle... crackle...

The crown prince of the Kappa Kingdom stood there in his full ice statue glory.

“W-we’re in big trouble, dish! Ah, wait, it’s time for my live show to air, dish! ☆ I can’t be late! ☆” Sara was a conscientious professional, and so she temporarily abandoned her prince to go on air for Asakusa Sara TV.

Scene 4

CHIKAI AND ENTA stood on a terrace near the Sumida River. The sun was beginning to set behind them.

“Pretty incredible that you survived that, kid.” Chikai laughed as he leaned back against the embankment wall.

“You’re a real jerk! I thought I was a goner!” Personally, Enta would have preferred to never see the man again, but Chikai reappeared in front of him once Enta fled from the cops and Yusa’s corpse. He hadn’t offered a single word in apology, either. The guy sure had some nerve.

“In this world, it’s only the bad people who survive. Gullible people like you should be more careful,” Chikai advised.

“You think you’re one to be giving me advice?!”

“Well, since you *did* survive, figured I might as well. Now, hurry up and make up with those friends of yours.”

“What? It’s not like I’m really...”

Chikai cut him off. “If you don’t, you’ll end up like me, you know?”

“Q-quit messing around,” Enta huffed, dropping all polite pretense.

Brrrrring, came the sound of an unfamiliar ringtone.

“Oh, looks like I better go. Here, eat these with your friends.” Chikai dug through his shirt pocket and chucked something at Enta.

“Huh?” Something slapped against the top of Enta’s hat and fell into his open hands. He looked down to see two lollipops, one strawberry flavored and the other apple.

“Yeah, Masa? I’m going to get on a boat and head there now.” After a short pause, “Yeah, of course Toi’s coming along too.” Chikai was already walking off.

Enta watched him leave, and then turned his gaze to the candy in his hands.

There's not enough here for the three of us... Though it's a little late to worry about that now, he scolded himself.

Suddenly his phone rang. A quick glance at the screen revealed that the caller was the very person he'd just been thinking of. He immediately accepted the call, only for a voice from the other end to come blasting through. "Jinnai? About things with Yasaka..."

"Why didn't you say anything to me?!" Enta had things he wanted to ask Toi, too.

"Huh?"

"You're the one who gave Kazuki that friendship bracelet!"

The moment he said that, there was a gulping sound on the other end. "He remembered?!"

"What? No, I don't think he's realized," said Enta.

"Oh... I figured as much."

"Why haven't you told Kazuki? If you're walking on eggshells because of me, knock it off." In fact, if that *was* the reason, Enta would have to sock him in the face.

"He doesn't remember anyway, and telling him after all this time just seems pointless. You two can go on without me and focus on being the Golden Duo." Toi's voice sounded just like it had before. Like he had given up on everything.

"Are you really okay with that?" Not so long ago, Toi had been the one to ask Enta that same question.

"I'm going to live for my brother. Anyway, later." Toi abruptly ended the call.

Enta's fingers squeezed around the two suckers in his hands. "He absolutely sucks at lying."

"Not here either..." Kazuki mumbled as he peered under a vehicle. He had been wandering aimlessly this entire time, trying to search for Enta and the Wishing Plates. Finding either seemed like a hopeless endeavor.

As usual, the high-rise parking lot was devoid of people. Kazuki stood up and peered at the Lexus beside him. “Oh, this is where we first met, isn’t it...?”

Kazuki was dressed in his Azuma Sara outfit, prowling about in search of the lucky selfie item, when he happened across Toi trying to break into a car. This was also where he started chasing after Nyantaro, and where they had met to hatch their plan to kidnap Azuma Sara.

While he was lost in a reverie, his phone began to vibrate. An unregistered number popped up on the display.

“Hello?” On the other end, he could hear what sounded like a river. “Toi?”

The person on the other end sucked in a breath. “I don’t need those plates anymore. I’m leaving the city.”

“What are you talking about? Are you mad because of our conversation earlier?” Maybe he had gone a little overboard then. Was that why Toi was saying he was going to leave now? “What’s wrong? Say something!”

In the distance, he could hear the shrill sound of a boat whistle.

“Just wait! I’ll work something out! You don’t have to just leave, Toi!”

After a pause, Toi responded, “No one realizes the bonds they have until they’re gone.”

Kazuki was confused. “Huh? What? What are you talking about?”

“I have to protect the only family I have left now.”

“Toi? Toooooi!”

There was an empty, robotic beeping on the other end, signifying that the call ended.

Kazuki had a distinct feeling that there was something he’d forgotten, though he had no idea what it could be.

“Toi...”

Toi boarded the red and blue water bus. He found his brother at the edge of the second deck and took a seat next to him. When he dumped his backpack

onto the seat beside him, his body suddenly felt lighter. The less baggage, the better.

“Have I forced you to abandon something important again?” Chikai’s palm reached for Toi’s head.

Would it be all right to accept his brother’s show of affection, just this once, Toi wondered?

“...Nah. They weren’t that important to me.”

Soon enough, the water bus took off, and they passed under the familiar red bridge.

Scene 5

“THERE YOU ARE! Kazuki!”

The Kappa Plaza was bathed in evening light as a breathless Enta came dashing into it. He carried a box in his arms with the label *Kapazon* on its side.

“If we don’t hurry up, he’s going to leave! You know, he actually—” *Wants to stay with us*. At least, that was what he tried to say, until the taste of blood washed over his tongue. “Guh!” His yellow hat tumbled to the ground. Silver Wishing Plates spilled out from the fallen box.

It took Enta some time to process the fact that Kazuki had punched him. Enta stared up at him from where he’d fallen, a hand pressed against his numb cheek.

“This is your fault, Enta!” Kazuki was crying. For *Toi*. “It’s your fault that Toi left! If we had those plates, he could have stayed! I feel sorry for Toi!”

The punch was probably to blame for why his thoughts were so chaotic. Still, Enta was angry enough for the both of them—for himself and for the boy that wasn’t here. “What... Toi this, Toi that, that’s all you talk about, but you’re the one who forgot

something important. You’re the one who’s cruel! Get your head out of the clouds and think for once!” Enta leaped to his feet and grabbed Kazuki by the shirt. This was probably the first time he ever touched Kazuki in anger.

“Why would I listen to what *you* have to say?” Kazuki scoffed. “You’re the one who betrayed us.”

Ah... You reap what you sow. To think that the seeds he’d sown would so quickly blossom into a poisonous flower...

“Enta, you and I...we’re through.”

It was like a bullet through the heart.

No, surely this pain was worse than any bullet.

“Y-you know, I... I...!” Kazuki clenched his hand into a fist, but it had nowhere to go. He shook Enta off as he crumpled to the ground. Then he started toward the box with the plates.

Suddenly, two shadows appeared in front of them.

“We foound you!”

Kazuki lifted his head to see two police officers—one with blond hair and dark skin, another with black hair and glasses. “Officers...?”

Enta whipped his head back and stiffened. The nightmare from that afternoon replayed in his head.

“That’s them...the Wishing Plates!” Reo only had eyes for the dishes spilling out of the cardboard box.

“Huh, why do...” Kazuki started to ask. He was the only one who didn’t understand the situation they were in.

“Why do we know about the plates? You don’t need to know. Now, let us open a door...” Reo pointed the barrel of his gun at Kazuki. The sign on it read *Attack*. “Is it desire, or love?”

“Kazuki!”

BANG!

The impact sent them both hurtling to the ground. By the time Kazuki opened his eyes, there was something warm pressed over him. He shifted his gaze to Enta’s face. The other boy was out cold. There was something warm and moist on his palm.

“Enta...?”

He jumped in front of Kazuki, and now his right side was soaked with blood. Kazuki cradled Enta in his arms. The red in front of him was the same shade that painted the evening sky. It was just like that memory he couldn’t forget, one that now came rushing back to him.

“You want to save your partner’s life?” Reo had a vicious look on his face as he peered down at the two, the four plates now safely in his hands. “Well, too bad! The plates that might have granted your wish belong to us now.”

“Enough of this. Let’s go,” said Mabu.

“Tch. This is the best part, why do you have to ruin it?” Reo bitterly stepped back, though he seemed to have a lot more he wanted to say.

“Call for help. Maybe he can still be saved.” Mabu left with those words, and soon the two officers disappeared.

“Ah... Ka...zuki...” Enta drifted back into consciousness.

“Enta, are you okay?! Why...why did you...”

We were fighting barely a second ago, Kazuki thought. I just told him that we were through.

Nestled in Kazuki’s arms, Enta just gave a weak, troubled laugh. “Heh heh...it’s hopeless. I couldn’t even...say I hate you...as a joke...”

Enta was glad he hadn’t said it. *Because if this really is our last conversation, I’d hate myself for saying it...*

The top deck of the water bus was accessible to passengers. This was where Toi found himself, gazing at Skytree as it jutted up through the night’s sky, gradually growing smaller and smaller in the distance. This was the first time he’d ever seen Asakusa like this—and it was because he was leaving.

As Toi learned and experienced new things, he knew that the sharpness of his memories of Asakusa would fade. Like that red bridge, that soccer ball, and even how it felt when he and his friends turned into kappa and held hands. Eventually, he would forget the flavor of Sobakyuu’s soba, too. Those memories would be replaced by new ones.

And through it all, he would have his brother. They didn’t have to be apart anymore.

His phone, now on silent, vibrated inside his pocket. Dim light illuminated Toi's face amidst the darkness. The display on his phone read *Kazuki*. He was glad he didn't say the boy's name. The moment he did, it would become a weight—baggage—that he couldn't simply throw away.

Plate 9: Brothers

Scene 1

AT NIGHT IN ASAKUSA, you could see Skytree from practically anywhere. It was like a pale, waxy candle soaring through the sky, so close that you could almost reach out and touch it, but so far that your fingers would only grasp air. In stark contrast to its quiet blue, the signs and lights outside the operation theater of Asakusa Sara General Hospital glared a deep red.

Kazuki had no idea how he ended up here after what happened.

The ambulance and patrol car had been noisy. Enta wouldn't open his eyes. Otone ran in wailing and crying.

Kazuki stood alone outside the door, frozen.

"Uurgh... It's so heavy, dish!"

Sara returned to Kaminari 5656 Kaikan's Tokiwa Hall, where she now strained to move the still-frozen Keppi. She was putting her whole weight into it, when finally...

"Ah...!"

The ice statue slid right off the stage. It spun smooth circles in the air as it soared down the escalator and right out the front entrance, tumbling into the road outside. Sara peered out from a window to see that her prince finally came to a stop on top of the asphalt. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Sadly, the worst was yet to come.

The ground rumbled as a single semitruck roared down the street straight toward Keppi. The vehicle's headlights illuminated the ice statue, revealing a glimmer of tears in the prince's eyes.

“Noooooooo!!” Sara shrieked.

Her cries were in vain. In seconds, the crown prince of the Kappa Kingdom was crushed beneath the weight of those enormous tires, shattering the statue into tiny pieces.

Scene 2

TOI AND CHIKAI'S BOAT gradually approached Eitai Bridge. At night, it lit up bright blue, giving off an entirely different aura than it did during the day. This end of the ship was furnished with a spacious dance floor. Its windows were left open, allowing the hum of the motor and the trickle of water to drift in. A breeze carried the river's summer scent inside as well.

Chikai was slumped over on one of the benches near the open window. He still had his sunglasses on his face, even as he snoozed.

Toi had few memories of seeing his brother asleep. This was especially true of when he was younger. Despite the fact that the two had shared a room, he'd still rarely ever seen his brother rest.

Chikai was the first one to develop persistent dark circles under his eyes. After their parents died, Toi soon realized that he had them too. He learned then, as a child, that such marks appeared due to lack of sleep. Since it meant he matched his brother, Toi hadn't minded.

Now that it was just the two of them, though, he realized that his presence just made the circles under Chikai's eyes worse. However short Chikai's nap might be, seeing his brother sleep in front of him made Toi feel kind of sentimental. He hoped they could find a place where his brother could sleep peacefully. He would do all he could to reach that place quickly.

He gazed into the backpack on his lap. Inside was all the easy money he'd stashed away until now, as well as the faintly gleaming Tokarev.

Beside him, Chikai suddenly shifted, causing the jacket that was draped over his knees to crumple onto the floor.

Thunk.

A hard sound indicated there was something wrapped up inside the fabric. Toi stood up and went over to grab it, only to realize that the jacket was unnaturally heavy. He discovered a black Tokarev tucked inside the inner pocket.

So his brother was carrying a gun. The truth of that overwhelmed him. Logically speaking, his brother was a wanted fugitive who had spent his life in the underworld; it made no sense for him to be unarmed. But Toi selfishly imagined his brother as the type who stubbornly refused to hold a gun, and it shook him now to lose that image of him. Chikai wasn't simply shouldering Toi's sins anymore; he was carrying a gun of his own accord.

Toi was still frozen with his brother's jacket in his hands when he suddenly heard a familiar melody that seemed to suck the tension from the air. Azuma Sara appeared on the television screen suspended from the ceiling inside the ship. Before his brother could wake up, Toi hurriedly placed the jacket over Chikai and scrambled back to his seat.

"We have some breaking news, dish. ☆ This evening, a series of shootings took place in Asakusa. One of the two victims has already been pronounced dead. The other, identified as fourteen-year-old Jinnai Enta, is currently unconscious and in critical condition."

Enta's picture flashed across the television screen. It hadn't been that long since Toi had been on the phone with him. At least Enta's picture showed a boy with a warm smile, completely different from the one they used to identify his brother. Enta had worn that same expression earlier, when he was eating croquettes.

"Aaaah," yawned Chikai. "Hm? It's that four-eyed kid."

Toi stiffened. "How do you know him?"

"Hm? Well, he helped me out and stuff. You two buddies?"

Unable to respond, all Toi could do was sit there as more news he didn't want to hear came streaming into his ears.

"The police suspect twenty-five-year-old Kuji Chikai to be involved in these crimes and are currently searching for his whereabouts. There is a high possibility that this man was also responsible for the shooting that happened four years ago..."

Chikai also listened in, looking displeased at what he heard. "Stop blaming everythin' on me. Can you believe this, Toi?"

So it wasn't true? Then who *did* shoot Enta? What was up with that gun his brother was carrying? In an instant, the worst possibilities flashed through Toi's mind.

"You can go back."

He flinched, drawn out of his reverie, only to notice Chikai wasn't looking his way.

"If you're gonna get off, do it now," said Chikai. "Any further and you won't be able to turn back."

Was he talking literally or figuratively? Though, when Toi thought about it, maybe they were one and the same. "He's already got someone to care for him, someone he's closer to than me. But I'm all you have left."

Enta wasn't alone. He had his grandmother and Otone. There were also his parents, whom Toi had never met but heard were in good health, living overseas.

"In this world, it's only the bad people who survive. Just goes to show you that four-eyes was one of the good ones."

Chikai didn't need to tell him that; Toi already knew it.

So, please...

"Yasaka, take care of him..."

At some point, while he was distracted, the boat passed beneath the center of Eitai Bridge.

An aura of grief permeated the darkened waiting room of the hospital, its electricity powered off.

Kazuki's hoarse voice echoed through the hallway. "It was two police officers who shot Enta! Enta jumped in front of me—"

"Just calm down, kid. The culprit was Kuji Chikai."

They had repeated this exchange a frustrating number of times now.

"We already received testimony that Kuji and Enta-kun were seen together.

We also found the suspect's fingerprints on the candy Enta-kun was carrying." The officer recited those words like a robot. No one seemed to notice the heart-shaped pin glimmering on his chest.

"No! I'm telling you, I saw it with my own eyes, an officer...!" As he hung his head, Kazuki felt something soft and warm brush over his shoulders. When he glanced back, he saw that Otone draped a blanket over him.

"That's enough, Kazu-kun."

He clung to her. "But they're wrong, I really did—"

Otone—his teacher, Enta's sister—was unwavering. "You must have been terrified, right? Thank you for helping Enta."

"No, it's my fault he..." Kazuki started to say. *It's my fault he got shot.*

The truth at the tip of his tongue was a terrifying one.

"It's not your fault," she said. "The one at fault is the man who shot Enta!" Even Otone had fallen for the police's fabrication.

A nurse called for her, and Otone rushed away, leaving Kazuki behind. Now all alone, Kazuki had no one else he could call out to.

Someone, help... Toi...!

As Toi and Chikai landed at the Hinode Pier, they found a cheerful welcome awaiting them.

"Big brooooo!" A burly man waited at the end of the dock, his waving hand causing his plump body to ripple from the motion. Apparently, he was one of Chikai's acquaintances.

"You idiot, I told you not to draw attention to yourself!" Chikai barked at him.

"Sorry! You were late, so I was worried about ya. Oh!" The man, who was bald and looked like a street vendor, turned his attention to Toi.

"Oh, this is my little brother, Toi," said Chikai. "Toi, this is Masa."

"Heya, I'm Masa! I've been lookin' after your bro! Nice to meetcha, Toi-san!"

“Who’s looking after who here, huh?” Chikai bonked Masa over the head.

“Ow, that hurts!” Judging by the latter’s mild reaction, it couldn’t have hurt that bad. Toi absently thought to himself that this must be their usual banter. “Anyway, for a middle school kid like you to sell that much weed is pretty amazin’. Guess I should’ve expected as much, since you two are related! You got some with you in that backpack? I’d love to split some.”

Toi understood that the man probably didn’t mean any harm. But he was really crowding Toi’s personal space.

“B-Brother,” Toi protested at Chikai.

“Well, as you can see, Masa’s an idiot, but he’s like a little brother to me. You two are pretty close in age. You should get along.”

His brother had no sense if he honestly believed that, and if it was a joke, then it simply wasn’t funny.

Scene 3

AROUND THE SAME TIME, another incident was taking place at the Asakusa Otter Police Box.

“Mabu... Are you *actually* Mabu?” Reo asked, a look of complete disbelief in his eyes.

The man in question stood silently before him with a large platter of freshly baked ningyo-yaki. They looked utterly perfect. A sweet aroma spread through the air.

Every previous time Reo suspected even the most trivial change in his partner, he'd been betrayed. It was too early to celebrate. It wouldn't be easy to recreate the delicate flavor of Mabu's original recipe. The real Mabu diligently studied and poured in hours of effort to create the taste that Reo loved. He'd had about enough of this imitation making light of the real Mabu.

No more, never again. Stop making these ningyo-yaki.

Even as he prepared as much verbal abuse as he could in his head, his heart eagerly yearned to test the flavor. Reo's hand trembled as he carried one of the warm treats to his mouth. His sharp, pointed teeth cut right through the soft outer shell as he tore a piece off. He chewed and chewed, the taste spreading over his mouth, then swallowed. His mouth cracked open slightly.

Slowly, the edges of his lips curled, taking the form of a smile. “This flavor... This is the real Mabu's flavor!”

Reo raised his eyes to the heavens, like an epic hero claiming victory. Why was it, at times like this, that he even felt grateful to a god he didn't believe in?

“Yes, this is it!! Finally, I-I have you back again...!”

Reo dumped the mountain of ningyo-yaki into his mouth and then threw his arms around Mabu. No longer would his hands hesitate to reach out for Mabu. He'd never dreamed they would be able to hold each other this tightly again.

A black shadow wriggled behind the two as they embraced. “Otterly...false-soiya!”

“I will succeed, dish, ☆” Sara said stiffly as she stood there in scrubs. Lined up on the operating table in front of her were the shattered shards of the man she loved.

“Scalpel.”

“Towel.”

“Scissors.”

“Glue.”

“Pepper.”

“Achoo! ☆”

Her mini-kappa nurses bustled about, following Sara’s stream of commands as they assisted in the operation. Hours and five whole tubes of glue later...

“This is the final piece, dish...”

She gripped the shard containing Keppi’s anus with her forceps and took a gulp of air. There was a clinking sound as his esteemed buttocks were completed.

“Now! ☆ Time to defrost him, dish!” All that remained was to pour the kettle of boiling hot water over him. Sara went about Prince Keppi’s revival the same way a person might cook insta-ramen. When it was finished, she exclaimed, “Prince, I am so glad you’re okay, dish!”

“Phew, I thought I was a goner, ribbit.”

“Hmm?”

Keppi stepped out of the rolling mists that consumed the air around him, standing in front of a full-length mirror where he could check himself out. “What the heck is this?!”

Due to Sara’s poor spatial reasoning, Keppi’s reassembled body now resembled a piece of avant-garde art.

“I love you no matter how you look, dish. ☆”

“Thank you. Merci!” Toi purchased a light meal and some lollipops from the convenience store by the Hinode Pier, and then headed toward the warehouses where Chikai and Masa were hiding out.

The only boats that used these docks were the round trip water buses or extravagant ferries. To go overseas, they were going to have to take a ferry from the neighboring Takeshiba all the way to the Izu Islands. Masa had been the one to make all those preparations, patiently waiting for Chikai and Toi to return. That was certainly convenient. Given how amiable the man seemed, his actions were unlikely to arouse any suspicion.

There was only one thing that bothered Toi about the man—his title. Chikai referred to Masa as being like his “little brother.” What the heck was that about? Sure, Toi realized the underworld had its own hierarchies. Still, his brother wasn’t too fond of forming tight relationships with other people.

He remembered how disgruntled his brother had been when Toi asked him to wait a day. Now, Toi felt the same way. He was forced to realize, once again, that he’d created his own, idealistic image of his brother.

Lost in that reverie, he’d somehow made it back to the edge of the warehouses.

“Your little bro sure has some guts!” Masa might have been amiable, but his voice was disastrously loud.

“...He’s special. He’s not like those other brats out there.” Chikai tried to lower his tone as he said that, but Toi could still hear the words clearly. His lips curled.

But the loud voice that followed froze him in place. “Well, he did kill the leader of YURIKAMOME at just ten years old!”

“Hey, I told you *I’m* the one who killed him!” There was a distinct hint of genuine anger mixed into Chikai’s voice.

Masa was either fearless or seriously stupid, but either way, he kept going. “Sorry! But the reason you are where you are now is ’cause you offered KAMOME’s head up to the boss as a gift! Man, you sure are lucky your little bro offed him!”

“Bastard, you really like shootin’ off at the mouth, don’t ya?!” Chikai’s exasperated voice was punctuated by a dull thud as he brought his fist down on his companion’s bald head.

“Ouch! I was just speakin’ the truth!”

By the time he realized what he was doing, Toi’s grip on the plastic convenience store bag in his hand had tightened so hard his knuckles were white.

He suspected the words of Chikai’s amiable “little brother-like figure” were right. It was true that Toi had committed murder. It was also true that Chikai was high enough up in his current organization that they entrusted him with control of a whole area. Toi’s crime had been his brother’s stepping-stone. He hadn’t expected Masa to know the truth of their lifelong secret, but then again, Toi had leaked it to his own two friends. He and Chikai were on equal ground in that regard.

The Tokarev in his backpack suddenly felt heavier.

Regardless, there was one thing he had to admit: if not for that gun, he wouldn’t have been able to take back what was important to him.

Just how long had Kazuki been sitting here on this waiting room bench? What was he even waiting for? *Who* was he waiting for? If they were going to deliver the worst news possible, he’d rather it never came.

A familiar plastic bottle popped into the edge of his vision. Otone was offering it to him, her eyes red and puffy. “Tonight’s going to be critical for him, they said. I called my parents too, but they may not make it in time...” Her sorrowful voice seemed to echo through the halls.

Seated beside Kazuki was Enta’s grandmother, her shoulders slumped forward.

“Kazu-kun, I’m sorry. I should be telling you to go home, but...please stay with him, talk to him.” Those were Otone’s true feelings, not what she was expected to say as a teacher. If there was any way to help Enta, she wanted to cling to it.

Kazuki understood that to a painful degree. Even so... “I don’t...even have the right to do that.”

Otone let out a weak laugh and shook her head. “That’s not true. In Enta’s eyes, you’ve always been a hero.” Surprised, he glanced up at her face. “Our family moved around a lot overseas, you know. Enta and I only returned to Asakusa four years ago. That boy, he just never seemed to warm up to his classmates. But then...”

She began recounting a story from their past, one Kazuki had forgotten.

“Hey, do you want to play with me?”

One day, a hero appeared in front of Enta as he sat at a corner of the schoolyard, hugging his knees. That hero was Kazuki.

“Um...me?” Not fully comprehending what the other boy just said to him, Enta squeezed the magazine he’d been holding tightly to his chest.

“You’re always sitting here watching everyone play soccer, right?” said the other boy.

Enta was a returnee—someone who had lived abroad for an extended period before returning to Japan. All the hopping around they did from place to place left him intensely shy, so he spent his days alone, gazing at soccer magazines. If he sat here, he could also watch his classmates as they played the sport.

“I-If you start hanging around someone like me, you’ll be excluded from the rest of the class and become a loner too. You’re better off pretending like you want nothing to do with—” Enta started.

“But I absolutely do want something to do with you! I mean it, I want to play soccer with you. If the two of us team up, I know we can become a Golden Duo!”

A Golden Duo...

Those words had a sweet ring to them. Enta peered up at Kazuki, who almost seemed to sparkle. Two contradictory impulses within him were battling it out: one wanted to take the hand in front of him, the other thought it was too scary to try. The deciding factor was the blue friendship bracelet tied around Kazuki's left ankle. It seemed to infuse Enta with courage as he took to his feet, grabbing the hand in front of him.

"...I'm Jinnai Enta."

"I'm Yasaka Kazuki! Let's be friends, Enta!"

"Kazuki..."

"You probably had no idea how it made him feel when he squeezed your hand, back then. You held his hand when he was lonely. That made him so happy. Enta told me so, you know. He said he'd never, ever let you be all alone. No matter what, no matter when, he would be there with you, he said."

Kazuki had only casually called out to the other boy on that day. He had no clue that it had such deep meaning for Enta until Otone told him as much.

"...What the heck," he cursed under his breath, dashing off.

He clung to the glass window in front of the ICU. Behind it, the room looked so sterile, so cold. Enta was stretched out on a bed, his skin so white, his normal sunny vitality nowhere to be seen.

Kazuki cried, as if to drive off the overwhelming fear that threatened to consume him, "This isn't like you! You always babble on and on about stupid stuff, but then you won't tell me the things that really matter. And now you're just lying there, injured! Open your eyes and smile at me like you always do! Enta...!" Slowly he sank to his knees.

Just then...

"You called?"

A familiar voice rang out behind Kazuki, and when he whipped around...

“Yo!”

There stood a freshly birthed Kappa-Enta.

“E-E-Entaaaa?!”

Enta immediately pressed his tiny mucus-covered hand over Kazuki’s mouth. “Shhh! Or my sister and grandma will hear you!” It *would* be bad if they realized a seriously injured patient had suddenly gone missing.

Kazuki nodded his head to show that he understood, and finally Enta withdrew his hand. “Pwah! But Enta, why are you here?”

“‘Cause I swallowed him up and turned him into a kappa, ribbit.”

Keppi appeared beside them. It felt like forever since Kazuki had last seen him. “Keppi! Where have you been?”

“It’s a long story, ribbit...” Keppi replied with a shiver.

Tik, tik, tik, tik, tik, tik...

Kazuki could faintly hear a strange sound drifting up from somewhere. “What’s that noise?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, it does kinda sound like a ticking time bomb,” Kappa-Enta remarked thoughtfully. Its precise rhythm made him uneasy. Comparing it to a bomb seemed accurate.

“Oh, you know, it’s just a timer to display Enta’s remaining hours slipping away, ribbit.”

When Kazuki glanced at the plate on Enta’s head, he noticed it had turned into a timer with the words *Life and Death* written on it.

“What?! Seriously?! Whoa! I can’t see it! Eeeek!” Kappa-Enta began wriggling around as if trying to find some way to view it for himself.

“Enta, calm down,” said Kazuki. “It’s okay, there’s still time!” He left out the fact that there were only six hours left. There was still a chance that they could change things. “I’m going to save you, Enta. We’re going to get those Wishing Plates back!”

“Kazukiiii... Uh, but...” Enta, who was splayed out on his belly, glanced up at

Kazuki. He then promptly hid his face. “I’m reaping the consequences of my own actions, you know. This isn’t really your problem to take care of.”

Enta understood, really. His jealousy drove him to steal the plates, which was why Toi left. Then he had a big fight with Kazuki and got shot by those strange men. It was divine retribution.

“It absolutely is my problem to take care of!” For a moment, Enta almost thought he was having another one of his delusions, but he was wrong. Kazuki’s strong hands wrapped around him, lifting him so that the two were at eye level. “We’re the Golden Duo, aren’t we?” The Kazuki smiling in front of him now was the very same one that had found him hiding in the corner of the schoolyard all those years ago.

“K-Kazukiii! Kazuki, Kazuki, Kazukiii!”

“Ehehe.”

Kappa-Enta threw his arms around Kazuki. Secretly, he felt like he could at least die happy now. He wouldn’t say that to Kazuki, though. Kazuki wouldn’t find it funny. And really, Enta wasn’t good at giving up. He wanted to live. He wanted to hear Kazuki call the two of them a Golden Duo again—and again and again!

Whether this is fate or not, I’m not going to let go of my desires anymore!

Scene 4

CHIKAI AND TOI were at a small plaza by the Takeshiba Pier, where Masa was giving them what they needed to make their trip.

“This ticket will take you to the island. From there, you’ll have to take a different ship.”

“Yeah. Sorry for all the trouble I put ya through,” said Chikai.

They’d used relatively legal means to travel so far, but after this, they’d be living mostly outside the law. Money and trust meant everything in the underworld. That was the world Toi would now be stepping into.

“Nah, this is no big deal! Bro, go on and take care of yourself. You too, Toi-san, glad to have met ya!” Masa smiled over at him.

Toi was sure they would never see the man again. With that in mind, he figured he could at least be nice since this was goodbye. “Thanks.”

BANG!

For a split second, light flashed over Masa’s face. An empty ammunition shell fell right in front of Toi.

“Bro...?” That was the last word Masa spoke. His body slumped to the ground and stopped moving.

“Let’s go. The boat’s gonna leave.” Without missing a beat, Chikai turned his back and started to walk off.

What just happened?

Why was this happening?

Brother... Brother...

“Wait!” Toi seized Chikai’s hand as he headed up the stairwell. “Why do you have a gun?! Why did you shoot him?!”

Chikai didn’t even look at him as he responded, “Masa’s not the kinda guy

that can survive in this world. So I killed him. That's all." His brother shook him off.

Toi's arm fell limply to his side. A countless number of 'whys' and 'how could yous' surged inside his chest like a tsunami.

Chikai left his motionless little brother behind and made it to the top of the stairwell. He sounded thoroughly annoyed as he spat out, "Tch, now a real pain in the neck is here."

"Bro... I was getting tired of waiting for you." Through the darkness, the white light of a nearby ferry carved the outline of a thin man who was seated there, sunglasses over his eyes. Two of his underlings were positioned beside him. Chikai could see that they were all armed, and the barrels of three Berettas stared him down.

"Taka," Chikai called back to him, "how'd you know I'd be here?"

The man, Taka, wore a thin smile as he responded coldly, "You've got so many enemies, it was easy getting information on you."

"Hah, you don't say! And after all I did for you." Taka had been Chikai's right-hand man when he was in SHIKOTAMA. Chikai reached into his jacket's inner pocket, where he'd stashed his weapon.

"You used that gun to kill Masa, didn't you? You'll even kill your allies just to save your own hide. How very like you."

Toi was still in the stairwell, motionless. All he could do was stand there and listen—to a conversation between his brother and some man he couldn't even see. Apparently, this Taka hadn't realized Toi was there yet.

"I'm the type who likes to play all my cards early. After all, if I don't, traitorous bastards like you come slinking up outta nowhere."

Toi could only see half of his brother's face from here. Chikai was grinning boldly, but Toi's view of him began to blur.

"This is the last time I have to suffer your backtalk. Whether we kill you or the cops catch you, all that awaits you is hell."

BANG!

“Gah!” The underling right beside Taka took a bullet to the head and went tumbling over the railing behind him.

Chikai held out his Tokarev and snarled, “Doesn’t matter. I’ll kill every last one of you!”

Dry, earsplitting blasts rippled through the darkness of the pier. Chikai’s odds would have been better if it was just two on one. Alas, as they traded fire from behind shrubs, HIS Tokarev TT-33 gave an empty click to indicate it was out of bullets.

“Tch...”

He tossed it aside and reached around his back. Having realized the situation, the other remaining underling quickly stood, intending to storm him while he was vulnerable.

But then—

BANG!

A bullet fired at the man from a direction he hadn’t anticipated, blasting right through his shoulder. “Gwahh!! Aaaah!”

Chikai popped his head out from the bush. What he saw made him doubt his eyes. “Huh? You...”

Toi was standing there, firing a gun. The weapon in question was the Tokarev from four years ago that Chikai thought they threw away.

Toi glanced over at him and shouted, “Run!”

An unusual silhouette appeared atop Azuma Bridge.

“The two of us are a couple~! ♪ The best couple~! ♪ Woohoo!”

Reo held wine in one hand and a cake box in the other as he sang and danced. Unlike the one they performed for Desire Extraction, this dance was genuinely carefree. Reo’s joy was too massive to contain, so he was expressing his

exultation the best he could.

By the time he reached the police box, the sun had completely set.

“Hey, sorry I’m late! But I did get your favorite pancakes and takeout so... Hm?”

It was dead silent inside. On the desk was a polite notice that said the police box was currently unattended, with some alternative contact information. Had Mabu gone out to buy something? Reo could go look for him, but he had no idea where Mabu might be. With no other recourse, he decided to just wait for his partner’s return.

When he glanced at the interior of the police box, though, he noticed that the door to the break room had been left slightly ajar.

“Mabu...?”

No one responded.

A sticky sense of anxiety clung to him as he tightened his grip around the wine bottle and stepped through the door. Instead of a normal break room, the doorway connected him to Asakusa Metro’s number eight exit. The otter mascot on the sign in front of him almost seemed to be mocking him.

A grating noise could be heard from down inside the underground shopping district.

“That looks otterly painful, Mabu...”

Reo knew it. The otter *was* involved.

He flew down the stairs. When he reached the bottom, he saw a shop in front of him. The shutters were drawn, cutting off his way inside. The words *Otter Bar* had been painted on them. From the other side, he could hear Mabu’s frenzied voice.

“Aah... Don’t go. You have to watch me...”

“Odd-er. Heh heh heh, as you wish...”

What was happening there on the other side of those shutters? Reo flipped up the post slot and peered in.

Red blossomed like a flower amidst the darkness. It was Mabu's heart, a sight that Reo was accustomed to seeing. The hand dragging it out of his chest, however, did not belong to Mabu.

The shadow otter yanked the pulsing mechanism close. Its upturned lips parted as it stuck its tongue out, taking a big, messy lick at the organ in its grasp. Mabu's bare shoulders jerked at the sensation.

In that moment, the hatred that was boiling in the pit of Reo's stomach came bubbling to the surface. He slammed his hand as hard as he could against the shutter. "Get away from Mabu!"

"Reo...?" Mabu sounded dazed, like a lost child.

"You bastard, keep your filthy hands off of him!" Reo furiously hauled open the shutter, intent on shining outside light onto the otter and its misdeeds. What the light revealed to him instead was...

"That's...me?" For a moment, he almost wondered if there was a mirror in front of him. If it *was* a mirror, then he certainly had a repulsive look on his face.

"Otterly untrue. I am an otter. However, I am also you."

"What are you talking about?!"

The otter had taken Reo's form as it embraced a naked Mabu. There was amusement in the creature's voice as it said, "We otters exist in this world as a concept. We're mirrors that reflect the desires within you."

"Stop..." Reo said. He didn't want to hear any more. Not another word.

"You're the one who wants to control Mabu, Reo. It is you who desires to kiss his otterly fake mechanical heart..." As if to drive its point home, the otter (still wearing Reo's shape) drew its moist tongue over the organ still in its hand.

"I said stop!" Reo had smothered those desires for so long. He didn't want to listen as the otter exposed them now.

"The two of you are merely controlled by your own desires—controlled by us otters. Now, Mabu, what is it that's most precious to you?" asked the otter.

Mabu just lingered there in the creature's grasp, slowly blinking.

"Is it me? Or him?" the otter whispered, his lips close enough to brush the pale skin of Mabu's neck. "Tell me, what am I to you?"

No more. Reo didn't want to hear any more.

"Right now, what I need is you..." Mabu's voice was so distant, like bubbles rising up from the deepest parts of the ocean.

The sound of glass shattering drowned out his words as Reo smashed his bottle of wine against the wall. The white paint was now covered in a splatter of red.

"Ha ha ha ha! I *knew* you were a fake. I was an idiot for believing for even a second that you weren't. I'll use my own power to bring back the *real* Mabu." Reo clawed at his chest, raking his fingernails over the fabric of his shirt before leaving.

It wasn't as if all hope was lost.

"Just one more plate. As long as I can get one more Wishing Plate...!"

Skytree went dark at midnight. From Kazuki's room, the tower was now only illuminated by the ring of light that ran across the perimeter of its observation deck and the high-altitude aircraft warning lights.

A hand slipped under the pillow on the top bunk, pulling out a single silver Wishing Plate. The intruder meticulously climbed back down and tiptoed to the door, but just as they were sliding it closed...

"Kazu-chan?" Haruka's voice called out from the bottom bunk.

"Sorry. Did I wake you?" Kazuki helped his little brother up, and the two sat side by side on the bed.

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Uh, yeah...for a bit."

Haruka asked, "Again, without telling anyone?"

Kazuki's heart jumped.

“I’m not as oblivious as I was before, you know,” his brother said.

Ahh, Kazuki realized. Haruka’s really grown. Maybe I’m the one who hasn’t. He gently wrapped an arm around Haruka’s shoulder. Kazuki knew his brother always felt relieved when he patted his head. “You’re right, I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m going to help Enta.”

“Is it going to be dangerous?”

“It could be, but I’ve already made my decision. It’s my turn to do the saving this time.” Putting his feelings into words only seemed to strengthen them further.

“Yeah, Enta’s always helping me out, too,” Haruka happily revealed. “He always came with me every week for rehab.”

Enta, that jerk. He never said a word to me, Kazuki thought. Just as quickly, he realized, *Well, knowing Enta, it makes sense he wouldn’t say anything.*

“...I guess there’s a lot I didn’t know,” said Kazuki. So much had happened, and there was so much he’d missed.

“Enta and I had the same wish.” Haruka reached under the Sara mascot plush at his bedside, pulling out a plate-shaped headdress—the one Kazuki wore when he was cross-dressing as Azuma Sara. There was a small, folded piece of paper underneath the headdress. Haruka pulled it open and smiled triumphantly. “Our wish came true! Pretty amazing, isn’t it?” He passed it over to Kazuki.

“Is that me?” It was a drawing of Kazuki wearing a blue uniform and kicking a soccer ball.

“You’re going to run again, aren’t you, Kazu-chan?”

There was a doodle in one corner that Enta must have drawn as well. The two of them had been waiting for Kazuki this entire time.

The doodle seemed to have been drawn on the back of a flier. Kazuki absentmindedly flipped it over and glanced at the front.

“You used to love that guy, didn’t you?” said Haruka.

It wasn’t a flier—it was a poster of a soccer player that had been famous

overseas when Kazuki first started the sport. The player stood out on the field, balanced on just his right foot with his left hand at his forehead. The pose definitely left an impression.

But he was pretty sure the first time he ever saw this pose was actually...

“If it breaks, it’s supposed to grant the wearer’s wish!” a boy told him, throwing a blue friendship bracelet down at him. With the sun at his back, he was a mere silhouette on top of Azuma Bridge, striking the same pose as that famous athlete. That boy was...

“It was Toi,” Kazuki gasped.

Toi had been the original owner of the friendship bracelet now tied around his right ankle. He knew now why Toi threw away his ball. But while Toi had turned his back on the sport, soccer became Kazuki’s light in the darkness. It was thanks to soccer that he met Enta, and the two became a Golden Duo. Even though Kazuki had thrown away the friendship bracelet once, Haruka had recovered it, and Enta had returned it to Kazuki.

He felt a gentle warmth climbing up his right ankle.

No matter how far apart we are, we’re still connected.

“Ehehe, I love seeing you run, Kazu-chan!” Haruka smiled gently. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

He had someone who promised to wait for him.

“I’ll be back,” said Kazuki.

And now he had somewhere to return to. That alone was enough to make him feel like he could run forever.

A shadow staggered tiredly across the desolate bridge between Takeshiba Pier and Hinode Pier. Dim streetlights flickered above Chikai, his face unreadable beneath the shadows of his glasses.

“You only get one life. It’s not a game where you can change out balls...”

If you die, it’s all over.

Every time someone died, he chanted that line to himself. If it was his turn this time, surely someone else would say the same thing.

“When things aren’t going well, just throw it all away...!”

That was what he’d done up until now.

My way is the right way, he thought.

“Brother!” It was the same voice he heard many times before, calling him from behind—a voice that belonged to his much younger brother. The only family he had left. Someone he had to protect.

“Ohh, hey, I was worried! Not hurt, are ya?” Chikai asked.

“...Nah.”

He glanced back over his shoulder. As he suspected, the gun in Toi’s hand was the same Tokarev TT-33 from their past. “Why do you have that gun?” *And how many times have you fired it?*

“Four years ago... I switched it out before you threw it away,” answered Toi.

“Aha, clever. Should’ve expected as much from my own little brother.” Chikai slipped his left hand behind his back as he proceeded forward, one step after the other.

“Are you...going to throw away me too?”

Chikai stopped in his tracks when Toi posed that question.

Toi was sure they couldn’t go back anymore, but that didn’t stop him from trying. “I don’t care if you are rotten to the core,” he said. “You’re still my older brother.”

Someone steals from you, you take back what’s yours! Every time someone swiped something from him, that was what he’d told himself. Toi stole someone’s life with this gun. He’d stolen his own brother’s life. If anyone was going to steal everything from him, it had to be Chikai.

“...You’re a bit too perfect to be my little brother.” Chikai held a Colt Junior in his left hand. “In this world, it’s only the bad people who survive...”

Toi slowly closed his eyes.

BANG!

Scene 5

BY THE TIME he realized what was happening, Toi was on the ground. He could hear the splatter of thick liquid dripping onto the pavement.

“Guh...hah...” Dark red circles were forming at his brother’s feet.

“I did iiiit!” Taka roared from where he stood on a boat anchored nearby.

Chikai immediately aimed his Colt and fired.

BANG!

“Urgh...!”

The range of Chikai’s gun was just barely enough to take the other man down. After the deed was done, Chikai turned his attention to his own stomach, and the red stain on his shirt that was growing. “Bastard!” he cursed as he staggered toward the water bus stop. Toi belatedly chased after him.

Toi was ready for his brother to take his life.

He covered for me again.

And this time, there would be no going back.

The sign on the red and blue water bus read *Out of Service*. Chikai made his way to the rooftop deck.

“What the heck are you doing? We have to get to a hospital...” Toi wasn’t talking to his brother so much as he was saying it for his own sake—so he wouldn’t panic or lose control.

“Forget it,” said Chikai. “Wouldn’t change things anyway.”

It was the exact answer Toi anticipated. He had no idea how to reply. He just watched as his brother hobbled forward, leaving puddles of blood in his wake as he headed toward the front of the ship.

“Brother!”

They were approaching the Great Chuo Bridge. Through the moonless darkness, its white pillars shone like cold gravestones.

Chikai slowly turned back. His lips were pulled up in a grin. He looked up at the bridge towering above them and fell backward.

As if finally broken out of his paralysis, Toi went stumbling and tripping after his brother. Even now, a dark red circle was forming beneath Chikai as he lay there on the ground. “Everything...should have gone smoothly,” he started.

“Don’t talk anymore...!”

“It’s your fault...that my plans got all messed up...”

“I’m sorry!” shouted Toi. “Just...stop...”

Chikai’s trembling hand reached up, digging through his shirt pocket. He pulled out a crumpled ten-thousand-yen bill. “Use this to take care of...your meals for a bit...” The blood-splattered bill smeared red across Toi’s cheek before it, together with his brother’s hand, fell to the ground. There were other ten-thousand-yen notes stuffed haphazardly in Chikai’s breast pocket as well. Sandwiched between them was what looked to be a white piece of paper. Toi had a feeling he knew what it was.

“Dammit...” mumbled Chikai.

Toi slipped the paper out, careful to avoid his brother’s notice, and flipped it over.

“Emotional attachments are...a real pain in the ass...”

It was their family photo, scribbled over numerous times with a black marker. Both of their parents’ faces were covered over, but Chikai’s was the least visible among them. The one place the scribbles stopped—the one place still visible—was the spot where a young Toi’s smiling face was.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!” Toi threw himself over his brother’s corpse and sobbed. It was as if all the tears he’d held in for these past four years were coming out all at once.

His brother had always been by his side. The day they went to the Sanja

Festival, the day they sold soba outside Sobakyyu, the day they went to Hanayashiki, the day Toi first showed interest in soccer, the day he bought a soccer ball, the day he was first able to do ten lifts, the day he joined the soccer team, the day he first scored a winning goal, the day his parents died, and the day he shot someone.

Always.

Toi was happy—privileged, even—that he was in a position where he could selfishly insist on the two of them staying together. It would have been better if his brother had kept living, though, even if it meant being far apart. Now, no matter what happened in the future, no matter if Toi was happy or in pain, his brother would no longer be with him.

The boat the two boarded was now approaching the Eitai Bridge, lit up all in blue.

Toi gradually lifted himself up. The wind tugged the bill Chikai had been holding loose and sent it flying. Once Toi was back to his feet, he tossed his opened backpack through the air.

“Dammit!” he screamed.

Hundreds of ten-thousand-yen bills went dancing through the air, scattering. It was only their crumpled family photo that remained, wiggling in the wind.

Interlude: Dream

“I HATE THE RAIN,” Reo spat. He absently clawed at his chest, a habit he’d had since the two first met.

It had been raining since early that morning in the Kappa Kingdom. The royal family proclaimed it the long-awaited beginning of the rainy season. Festivities sprang up in the town outside the castle. Around the country, kappa were stepping outside to let the rain of life shower over their head plates. They also celebrated by pouring water over each other’s plates.

“Why?” Mabu asked, curious. He had never heard of a kappa that hated rain before. Plus, there was a festival going on, which meant there were delicious food and rare toys all over outside. He wanted to show Reo all of those things.

“Getting my body wet just makes my heart sting even more.”

Reo once had someone whose head he wanted to douse with water, but they were gone now. With the war, everyone was gone. There was no roof under which he could seek solace, and thus his plate overflowed with water. Like him, it had nowhere to go, leaving it no choice but to soak into the ground.

Reo gripped painfully at his chest. Mabu reached over and wrapped his warm hand over Reo’s. “From now on when it rains, we’ll just have to spend the whole day together,” Mabu said, his expression sincere.

“Huh?”

What are you trying to sound so casual for? Reo wondered. And how will that solve it? I don’t get you at all.

“I’ll pour water over you, so you pour water over me,” said Mabu.

Reo made a strange face. He raised his brows, then lowered them again, blinked, opened his mouth and closed it again. Finally, he let out a sigh. In a voice as quiet as a single droplet of water falling, he said, “That’d make me happy.”

Hearing that, Mabu squeezed his hand. “If you’re happy, then I’m happy too.”

Reo made another strange face, one Mabu found himself thinking he’d like to see again.

His consciousness suddenly returned. An otter was in front of him, peering down.

“Odd-er. Maintenance is over, Mabu.”

“...Thank you.” Still feeling a bit hazy, he lifted himself up and straightened his clothing.

“You’re always spacing out. What do you even think about while you’re in maintenance?”

“I had a dream...from long ago,” Mabu answered, a gentleness in his eyes, as if he could still see the young Reo from his dreams.

“Are you otterly certain?” The otter’s voice sounded unusually surprised.

“Yes. I’m not supposed to be able to dream, but every time I come here, I *always* dream about when Reo and I were young.”

Mabu was right—the otters had equipped him with a machine heart and brought him back, but it didn’t possess unnecessarily complicated functions such as the ability to dream.

“That is an otterly surprising development. It’s proof that you’re slowly becoming the real Mabu. You mustn’t slack off on regular maintenance in the future. Understand?”

“Yes,” Mabu answered obediently.

When he stepped outside, he discovered it was raining in Asakusa.

Mabu loved the rain. Just hearing it soothed his heart. It was raining the day they met as well. Reo looked like a god back then, the droplets bouncing off his golden hair. He was rather brusque, knocking Mabu’s hand away when he extended it.

Years later, Reo apologized to him for what happened back then.

“I was glad to see those red marks on your hand,” he said.

Mabu hadn’t understood what he meant by that, but when he replied, “If you’re happy, then I’m happy too,” Reo got mad at him.

He loved seeing Reo smile—loved seeing his brows lower and his mouth open wide, shining like the sun. He could admit that the rain didn’t seem to suit Reo.

Mabu was so caught up in remembering the past that he was slow to get moving. He made haste back to the police box.

“I have to hurry home...”

I don’t want to break my promise to you any more than I already have, he thought.

Plate 10:

Doll

Scene 1

***T**HIS WORLD WAS overflowing with connections. Connections were like sweet poison.*

All he had to do was think back.

But why did he have to drink the bitter medicine of despair?

Unfulfilled desires for connection accumulate almost like layers of sediment. And just as you can't stop the currents of a river, nor can you stop people from being born.

One of the two young people said, with their dying breath, "Don't let go of your desires. Only those who can connect to their desires have the ability to grasp the future in their hands."

The other of the two faithfully swore to keep that promise.

It was all a clinical test, to prove that we are who we are.

Beneath his eyelids, Mabu could see his partner desperately trying to shout something at him. He couldn't quite tell if the other man was angry, or if he was about to burst into tears at any moment...

"Reo..."

When Mabu opened his eyes, the person before him wasn't Reo. He found himself staring up at a hemp leaf-patterned ceiling. As he watched it absentmindedly, a black shadow slipped into view.

"Odd-er..." the creature said.

"...Who are you?"

Just how long had he slept? It felt like he couldn't speak properly—as if he was using his vocal cords to form words for the first time.

“I'm an otter. You were reborn as my doll.”

Mabu did vaguely recall that he had lost his life.

Regardless...

“I want to see Reo...”

He tried to lift his heavy arm—to reach out and touch a person who wasn't even there. Instead it was the shadow that took his outstretched hand.

“Very well. He strongly desires to meet you again as well. However, there is one condition...”

Scene 2

IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT when Kazuki and Enta met in the Kappa Plaza.

Keppi wore a reserved look on his face as he sought one final confirmation. “You know I can’t guarantee your lives won’t be in danger, ribbit. Knowing that, will you still go to retrieve the other plates, ribbit?”

Kazuki showed no hesitation. “I’ve already made my decision.”

“Kazuki...” Despite the emergency situation they found themselves in, Kappa-Enta savored the joy he felt receiving Kazuki’s attention.

Keppi watched the two of them, thinking back to the two that betrayed the Kappa Kingdom for the Empire. He didn’t know their exact circumstances, but there was one thing he did know. “You have formidable opponents, ribbit. The bond that the two of them share is so strong, no one can hope to take it from them, ribbit.”

“Hah, don’t pretend like you understand!” A voice broke out from above. A man stood there, aiming his gun at the three of them, the sign on it reading *Capture*.

“Huh?!” In the blink of an eye, Keppi was trapped in an elastic restraining device.

“Keppi!”

Reo slammed his foot against the now tire-shaped Keppi. “So this is where you were hiding yourselves. Unfortunately for you, that barrier you put up is only good against otters. It doesn’t work on us kappa, you know?”

“Kappa?!” Kazuki gasped.

“They’re actually my servants, ribbit! Reo...just what in the world happened, ribbit?!”

“Doesn’t matter. All I want is the Wishing Plates.” For a former servant, Reo certainly did have a disrespectful attitude. He kicked the bound Keppi over and

started toward Kazuki. “Where is the final plate?”

So they already know what our trump card is, Kazuki realized. Fortunately, they didn’t yet realize its whereabouts.

Kazuki stepped protectively in front of Enta and responded, “I’m not giving it to you! It’s your fault that Enta is... Just give back the other four plates!”

“Kazuki...” Once again, Enta savored the joy he felt despite their dire situation. Suddenly, he found himself hoisted up into the air. “Huh?”

Reo completely ignored Kazuki’s bristling, waltzing over and hauling Enta up to peer at the plate on his head. “Ahh, you’re the kid I shot, huh? Just four hours left. Too bad, you won’t even last ’til dawn.”

“Just four hours?!” Kappa-Enta couldn’t hide his shock when he realized just how little time remained.

Every second mattered in this fight. Unable to just stand by and watch, Kazuki intervened. “We don’t have time for this! Just tell us where the plates are!”

“Hmm. Looks like we both have something important we need those plates for.”

Kazuki and the others found themselves dragged to the underground area beneath the Asakusa Otter Police Box.

“Just four more hours, just four more hours, just four more hours...” As they rode the elevator down, Kappa-Enta kept mumbling incessantly to himself.

Keppi was trying to find any opening he could to convince Reo to help him, but so far, things hadn’t turned in their favor. “Reo, it’s not too late, ribbit. You can join forces with me for the sake of the Kappa Kingdom and—”

“Sadly, I have no interest in either the otters or the kappa. I just want to make *my* wish come true,” Reo said.

“What’s your wish, ribbit?” Keppi asked. “Does Mabu share the same feelings as you, ribbit?”

“Enough useless talk.”

“Just four more hours, just four more hours, just four more hours...”

Kazuki wrapped his arms around his frightened friend’s shoulders and tried to soothe him by saying, “I swear I’ll save you, Enta. Just trust me!”

“Kazukiii...!” This was the third time Enta found himself overwhelmed with joy despite their circumstances.

“Hah, how laughable!” Reo spat, as if disgusted by watching the two of them. “False beliefs are dangerous, you know? There isn’t a person out there that won’t hesitate to cut someone off in the pursuit of their own desires. Just like this selfish prince, or that heartless doll!”

“Reo, you...” Keppi pursed his lips, having recognized the anger in his servant’s voice. It was true enough that Reo and Mabou had gotten swept up in all of this because of Keppi’s own weakness. He falsely assumed the two perished during the Kingdom’s collapse, which was why he didn’t search for them even after he awoke in the human world.

“Even so...” Kazuki suddenly stood up. He stared unflinchingly at Reo. “I can’t change that I hurt the people that were precious to me in the past, and I may still continue to make mistakes...” He had Haruka, his parents, Enta who was by his side now, and even Toi who wasn’t. “Still, I don’t want to give up on the bonds I have with other people. We’re going to stay together—now and forever!”

No matter how many times Kazuki fell, he’d get back up and run again. He had to, so he and his friends would remain connected.

“Tch, just how big of a fool are you?” Reo was the one who turned his gaze away first. He felt absolutely awful. Soon he would make these kids taste despair.

Scene 3

THEY WALKED INTO a cylindrical room with pillars, the same one they had seen before when they came to rescue Haruka. Reo kept his gun trained on Kazuki and Kappa-Enta, forcing them to walk ahead. At the end of the central bridge stood Mabu, his back turned toward them.

“Mabu!” Keppi called out. He was cradled in Kazuki’s arms, still trapped in the restraining device.

“...Prince Keppi.” Mabu peered back at them, not looking particularly surprised at all. But his emotions had always been rather flat compared to Reo, so that didn’t particularly strike Keppi as odd.

Since Reo seemed completely uninterested in hearing them out, Keppi decided persuading Mabu was their only chance. “Mabu, you have to convince Reo for me, ribbit. Sing that song like you two used to so long ago, ribbit!”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not, ribbit?!”

Mabu turned his back on them once again, responding in a flat monotone, “I’m not the person you want me to be.”

Although Reo was quiet up until this point, the moment he heard that he burst out, “Exactly! You’re just a failed puppet!”

“Reo,” Mabu continued, “the otters found out about the plates.”

“What?”

“They read my memories and found out.”

He probably meant the maintenance Reo just recently intervened in. That must have been when they discovered the truth. Reo didn’t want to recall the scene. He suffered flashbacks constantly, but this time they swept over him like a flood. “...You,” he hissed, “how many times must you disappoint me before you’re satisfied? Enough of this, you traitor!” Reo was so preoccupied rushing

over and snatching at Mabu's collar that he completely lost sight of Kazuki and the others.

"Now's our chance!" Kazuki and Enta moved in sync, each slamming a foot as hard as they could into the tire-shaped Keppi.

"Dehurgh...!" He went spinning through the air, bouncing up and down across the long, narrow bridge. Kazuki and Kappa-Enta rushed after him.

"Tch...!"

As Reo looked over his shoulder at them, annoyed, Mabu opened his mouth to try to speak. "Reo..."

"I can't take this anymore... Are you happy? I'm always getting pissed at you, while you act oblivious and devote yourself to those otters!" Reo shrieked, forcing each word out as he clawed at his chest.

Mabu reached his arm out to try to touch Reo's hand. "Reo, without you, I—"

Reo slapped the other man's hand away. "Don't touch me! I don't care if your heart stops. You're not *my* Mabu. You're not the Mabu that found me when I was alone...the one who told me the words I wanted to hear!" He hurried after Kazuki and the others.

Reo was so close, and yet Mabu's hand—his voice—couldn't reach him. Mabu pressed his hand into the left side of his heart. "It hurts." No doubt his machine heart was having some kind of malfunction.

"This is the innermost room of this place, ribbit." Keppi rolled himself to a stop. Despite being stuck in the restraining device, he managed to master how to move in it.

Right now, they were in the deepest level of the cylindrical tower. Darkness spread out all around them, so they had no way of guessing how big the room really was. If they glanced up, they could see an enormous round object floating above them, with a ring orbiting it like Saturn. The planet-like structure in the middle was actually a gigantic taiko drum. The four silver Wishing Plates were

inserted into the rim of the drum.

“There they are!”

When Kazuki tried to approach, the drum suddenly began to beat. The Saturn-like ring emitted a light, and a mysterious creature from deep within began to groan.

“D-d-d-d-darkness!”

The transparent interior of the drum filled with liquid, and something pitch black within glared out at them with red eyes, seeming ready to leap out at any moment.

“So I’ve finally found you, ribbit. Black Keppi...!”

“Black Keppi?” Kazuki asked, confused.

“That’s the embodiment of my despair. The otters stole him from me, ribbit.” Keppi began to recount the story, his tone gravely serious as he spoke. “During the war, I lost so many people who were important to me that despair threatened to swallow me whole. Thus, I split my own shirikodama in half, ribbit.”

“So then that thing is...?”

“He’s my other half. I came to this world to fuse myself with Black Keppi, so I could take down the otters, ribbit.” At long last, Keppi revealed his true motive—something none of them were privy to before.

The situation was a bit difficult to grasp for Kazuki and Enta. The only thing they’d fought up until now were Kappa Zombies. “Just what are these otters?” Kazuki asked.

Suddenly, a spotlight cut through the darkness in the room. “Odd-er. We are your desires in their rawest form.” Within the ring of light, a single dark shadow appeared—an otter.

“That’s...an otter?” said Kazuki.

Enta was just as confused. “I really don’t get what’s going on.”

No matter how much they squinted, the outline of the figure remained little

more than an undefined, indiscernible silhouette. It was like a mosaic, like a larger shape broken down into a thousand tiny pieces—but neither the pieces nor what they added up to made any sense. If someone asked them to later recall what they had seen and draw it on paper, the sketch would be blank.

“We are an amalgamation of desire with no singular form. We can manifest ourselves into whatever shape the person seeing us wishes.”

The spotlight switched over to the tire-shaped Keppi. The otter now stood on top of his head.

Keppi barked up at him, “What have you done to Reo and Mabu, ribbit?!”

“What otter slander. Enough of your accusations. We just saved two pitiful kappa, that’s all,” the otter asserted loudly.

“Saved? You took advantage of their weaknesses and manipulated them, ribbit!”

“They were otterly broken to begin with, which made it easy. Just like this...” The otter’s body suddenly transformed, melting into a liquid-like substance that bolted through the air toward Kappa-Enta.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! What’s that?!”

“Odd-er!”

In seconds, the dark shadow dove right inside Enta’s nostrils. He collapsed to his knees and went silent.

“Enta?!”

He was a bit unsteady as he returned to his feet, eyes now dyed red. “We’ll be taking those plates. We’ll use despair—the kind without beginning or end, rooted in the inability to connect to others—and we’ll rule over this world!” The otter’s voice reverberated inside Enta’s head.

“Mm... Where am I...?”

Enta opened his eyes to find himself at their secret soccer practice area. At some point, he returned to his human form and was now clad in his soccer

uniform. There was no one else in the area. He couldn't even hear the sound of the Sumida River.

Suddenly, a soccer ball rolled over to him. His eyes followed its trajectory back to a familiar silhouette.

"Kazuki?"

The other boy wore the same soccer uniform as Enta. It had been a long time since he'd seen Kazuki wearing his. His heart was secretly pounding.

Kazuki shook Kappa-Enta, calling out to him and trying to wake him from his daze. "Enta! What's wrong?! Hey, can't you hear me?!"

Seeing the other boy's condition, Keppi groaned. "This must be... They've got Enta in a trance."

"Oh no! What should we do?! Enta!"

His little kappa body jolted. It looked as if he was reacting to the sound of Kazuki's voice, but the way he stared blankly forward without meeting Kazuki's eyes was strange.

Kappa-Enta squirmed, seeming embarrassed as he muttered back, "K-Kazuki...?! What is it?"

Enta had no idea what was going on. Kazuki—dressed in his soccer uniform—was now hugging him from behind.

He could feel Kazuki's warm breath against his ear. Kazuki's arms were wrapped around his front, gently caressing him and holding him in place. As pitiful as it was, Enta couldn't even move an inch.

No, this is the luckiest moment of my life, one I'll never get to have ever again, why can't I move?!

In truth, his mind was basically overloaded. He was on the verge of tears.

Just then, he heard Kazuki chuckle. "Hey, Enta. Won't you give me that Wishing Plate?"

“Huh?” Enta instinctively peered back at the other boy. Kazuki’s beautiful face was so close and smiling at him. It almost sent a chill down his spine.

“Don’t you like me, Enta?”

“O-Of course I do! We’re the Golden Duo, after all!” Enta turned his face away as he spoke, unable to handle their close proximity.

He could feel something soft press against his earlobe—Kazuki’s lips. “If you give me that plate, I’ll let you do whatever you want to me.” Kazuki’s whisper felt like it was crawling straight into his ear.

Enta’s gray matter seemed to tremble, as if he’d taken a punch right to the head. His whole body was so filled with emotion that he didn’t know what was happening. A hand gently cupped his cheek, turning his head until he could see Kazuki’s large pupils staring back at him. He couldn’t look away anymore.

“Now, come. Do this for me...”

“Do it for...Kazuki...” Kappa-Enta slipped out of Kazuki’s grasp and took several unsteady steps forward.

“Enta...?”

He was approaching the giant Saturn-like structure floating above them. Out of nowhere, underlings came and lifted Enta up through the air by his little arms.

“We’re in trouble, ribbit!”

Enta hovered, as if led by angels, until he finally landed safely on the outer ring of the structure.

“Enta! Stop this!”

Kazuki’s voice couldn’t reach him.

Kappa-Enta slowly reached back into his shell and pulled out the last silver Wishing Plate. Kazuki entrusted it to him, just in case anything happened.

Back in the practice area, where time had stopped, Enta was drowning in

ecstasy. This love was a wish he was sure would never be granted—a wish he was sure would one day fade away—and yet Kazuki’s warm body was there, right before Enta’s very eyes. Kazuki had a satisfied look on his face as he accepted the plate.

Kazuki’s thin fingers caressed Enta’s cheek, brushing over his lips. Enta just closed his eyes and remained silent. He felt completely fulfilled, wrapped up in Kazuki’s embrace like this.

“Thank you, Enta. Now instead of just being the Golden Duo, we can be even more special to each other...”

“...What are you talking about?” In an instant, Enta’s eyes snapped open. A relationship more special than being the Golden Duo? No such thing existed in this world!

The real Kazuki wouldn’t just do whatever I wanted!

He snatched the plate back and shouted, “Kazuki is fine just the way he is! That’s the Kazuki I want to be connected to!”

Enta threw the plate to the ground, shattering it into pieces. Then, heaving, he toppled backward. As his body went plummeting down through the air, Kazuki raced forward to catch Enta in his arms.

“Enta! Are you all right?!”

The other boy painfully rasped, “Sorry...for breaking the plate.”

This wasn’t the time for such words. Kappa-Enta couldn’t see it himself, but the timer ticking down his life had almost run out. Without the fifth plate, the silver Wishing Plates were worthless.

Suddenly, Kazuki recalled what Keppi told him before. *“I can transfer your shirikodama to him, ribbit. If I do that, his life will be restored, ribbit.”*

That’s right, there was a way!

“It will be as if you never existed in this world to begin with, ribbit.”

Still, he had to do it.

“Keppi, use my shirikodama—” Before he could finish speaking, a weak fist

flew at him.

“Loser...!” There was a light tapping sound as Kappa-Enta’s fist made contact with his cheek. Enta was out of breath, but his voice still carried the full weight of his anger as he scolded his friend. “Only a loser would sacrifice themselves like that, moron!”

“But—”

“I’m not giving up on the possibility of a future where we get to be together... If you give up first, I’ll resent you in the afterlife...”

“Can’t you just forget about me?” asked Kazuki.

In true, stubborn kappa fashion, Enta just flashed him a thumbs up sign and said, “Don’t underestimate the power of our Golden Duo—ngh!”

The otter suddenly came bursting out of Enta’s nostrils. “How foolish. But we’ll still take those four plates...”

BANG!

The creature’s head was suddenly blown off by a bullet, giving it a warped silhouette.

“Not on my watch!” At some point, Reo retrieved the other four plates. The sign on his gun currently read *Attack*.

The now-headless otter floated up through the air and turned to face Reo. “What an otter surprise. What’s this about, Reo? You don’t care what happens to Mabu?”

Up until now, he’d been controlled by those words. That ended today.

“I don’t need that puppet! I’m going to use these plates to bring back the *real* Mabu!”

“What an otter fool you are. Allow me to enlighten you,” said the otter. Static ran across its body.

A long, thin bridge stretched high over the cylindrical floor, with pillars standing all around it. At the end of this bridge stood Mabu, facing the otter.

“Now, Mabu,” it said. “It’s time to make your wish come true.”

Mabu fell gently backward, pulled by gravity. There was nothing beneath him but air. Below, darkness opened its jaws to swallow him up. Lying in wait for its prey at the bottom was a taiko-shaped engine spewing pitch-black flames.

It all happened in slow motion.

Even in moments like this, Mabu’s heart pulsed in a perfectly normal rhythm. It would never thrum again as it once had.

I thought being near you would be enough for me. But if I can’t have your heart again, then I want to at least fulfill this selfish desire of mine, Mabu thought.

Mabu’s plummet into the large taiko drum housing Black Keppi lasted only a few seconds. The closest person watching it happen was Reo. His mind went blank. He even forgot to breathe. Despite how light Mabu’s body looked, it still obeyed the force of gravity as it fell.

Slowly, Mabu turned his head to face Reo. The latter couldn’t peel his eyes away.

Stop it. I don’t want to look. Stop. This can’t be happening.

Mabu stared straight back at Reo the whole time. Then, for just a second, right at the very end...he smiled.

“Mabuuuuuuuuuuuu!”

Reo’s cry tore through the air, just as it had once before in the past.

Scene 4

“VERDICT: Desire. Mabu: Transform.”

Mabu’s transformed Zombie body was transported to the Azuma Bridge.

Reo was utterly confused. “I don’t get it! What is he thinking?!”

What was the purpose of this? How stupid. Was it Reo’s fault?

“That’s up to you to find out, ribbit. If you’re prepared to see Mabu’s desire for yourself, I can help,” Keppi said quietly.

Is he telling me to do what I think he is? Reo wondered. All by myself?

“Shit...” Reo aimed his gun and shot at the restraining device holding Keppi hostage. Then he whipped himself around and leaned his butt out. “Do it now!”

Keppi shouted, “Sing that song!”

A familiar pain shot through Reo’s butt, one that he hadn’t felt for a while.

Reo landed inside Azuma Bridge’s Desire Field. A large number of Mabu’s ningyo-yaki were being gathered on top of it. The Mabu Zombie was at their center, his back facing Reo as he

sipped away at his green tea. The cup was Reo’s favorite, one with the word *Desire* written on it.

Reo sang the odd lines of the song while Mabu’s voice cut in periodically to join him:

There is something I have to take back.

—*Our connection.*

Before the person I like figures things out, there’s something I must take back.

—*Our connection.*

Something no one else can find out about.

—*This secret.*

Long ago, back when Reo and Mabu were still Keppi's servants, the three of them would perform Sarazanmai. They could never have known back then that the future would lead them here.

"Kappature it!" Keppi's voice brought Kappa-Reo back to his senses as he dashed toward Mabu Zombie.

Their song continued:

You and I

—*Should be connected together.*

Desire, confirm the meaning

Of life.

—*Burst open.*

Swim through life, grab success.

—*You can believe that*

This is love.

Serve up your soul on a plate, stack them up

Catch the ball.

—*Pluck it out.*

Mabu Zombie got down on all fours. All preparations were complete.

Make my wish come true.

Sarazanmai!

Hardened with resolve, Reo propelled himself through the air, heading straight toward Mabu Zombie's butt. "I kappaptured it!" he shouted as he claimed Mabu's shirikodama. The sphere felt cool in his hands as he stared into it, and he handled it carefully so as not to drop it. "So this is...his desire."

Reo's consciousness was pulled back in time until he found himself staring at a hospital room in the Otter Empire.

"However, there is one condition..."

Mabu had just awoken. The otter beside him was grasping his hand.

“You must abandon your connection to Reo.”

Those words crashed like a shockwave into Mabu’s ears.

The otter continued, as if trying to convince him. “Connections are poison. If you profess your love to Reo, your heart will explode, leaving nothing behind. Then you’ll never be able to be with Reo ever again.”

“No...” Mabu pressed his hand over the left side of his chest. He could feel the steady beat of his heart there. Yet he could sense no warmth at the tips of his fingers.

“Now, tell me you hate Reo.”

Hate.

Mabu hadn’t used that word in a very long time. Memories from his childhood came rushing back—those wild eyes from when they first met, the way Reo’s brows sank when he first laughed, the way his lips trembled when he was hurt, the strength in his voice when he called Mabu’s name. Each of his facial expressions, too many of them to count, had been so precious that Mabu carved them all into his heart.

I want to be connected to you... I want to live with you... I want to be connected to you... I want to be with you... I want to be connected to you...

Reo...

It’s fine, really.

There’s nothing more to worry about.

“I...hate Reo.” Even he was surprised by how cold his voice sounded. But he had to kill off his emotion, otherwise it threatened to spill over.

“Very good, Mabu. Now why don’t you cook up some ningyo-yaki for me again?”

Ever since then, he felt like he was caught in a dream. Whether it was a dream or reality, he didn’t care.

In order for Reo and I to have a future together, I can't let go of my desire.

Mabu's emotions washed over Reo like a flood, threatening to drown him.

"Mabu, you threw away our connection just so you could stay with me?"

"Finally, I was able to tell you..." the Zombie shouted, sounding satisfied, before its body burst.

"Mabu..." Reo was in a daze as the water streamed around him, Mabu's shirikodama still held tightly in his hands.

A green blob came flopping down beside him, hitting the ground with a thump. "Hurk..." It was Kappa-Mabu.

"Mabu?! Why are you...?!"

"Come on, we have to get that shirikodama to the prince." Mabu quickly lifted himself to his feet and set off running.

"Hey, wait!" Reo chased after him, still completely confused. The figure racing ahead of him was so familiar.

Who are you? Are you really some emotionless doll that just keeps betraying me? Are you a fake? Or are you...are you...

"Saaaa!"

"Saaaa!"

And then the two of them together, "Sara! Zan! Mai!"

"Leaking."

Reo's own secrets and memories began to leak now. He was walking through a sterile white hallway, wearing a casual type of kimono. Months passed since he first awoke and found himself in the Otter Empire, though he wasn't sure how many. They hadn't told him how much time had passed since he agreed to

the conditions they forced upon him.

And as he waited, walking around, he heard a faint voice. Reo noticed the door in front of him was left slightly ajar. He tiptoed closer and peeked in to find that Mabu was sitting on a bed within.

He was alive. Mabu was alive!

“My wish really did come true,” he mumbled to himself.

It was as if the clouds of gloom that hung over him were finally gone, giving way to sunlight. Reo didn’t care if it meant he was a slave to the Empire. As long as he was together with Mabu—

“I...hate Reo.”

It almost felt as if his heart stopped.

Hate.

That was only the second time Reo ever heard the word come from Mabu’s mouth. “Very good, Mabu. Now why don’t you cook up some ningyo-yaki for me again?” Unable to watch as the otter pushed Mabu down onto the bed, Reo fled.

He ran and ran, but no matter how far he ran, Mabu’s words seemed to chase him.

Hate.

Hate.

I hate Reo.

“The Mabu I know would never abandon our relationship!”

That’s right. He’s not Mabu. He’s not my Mabu!

He’d already mentally prepared himself before he officially met Mabu after his revival. At least, he was *supposed* to be prepared.

“No! You’re not the Mabu I know! Mabu never had that kind of look on his face!”

“He keeps a cool face, but he continues to betray me again and again. Like a doll, empty of all emotion.”

“As if you could ever understand even an ounce of what I’m feeling...!”

Every discrepancy that Reo found made him bristle. Yet there were perplexing moments when he suddenly felt like this *was* the real Mabu.

Mabu’s life wouldn’t last long without help. For Reo, holding the other man’s life in his hand was a sweet hell beyond his imagination. Reo lost count of how many times he considered stopping that mechanical heart from beating. He considered leaving as well. He even thought, at one point, that maybe he’d be better off dead.

But each time he did, he remembered the warmth of Mabu’s hand as he lay dying in the rubble. Mabu asked him not to let go of his desires, and said that they were what kept people alive.

The two of us kept wishing for the same thing.

“The one who didn’t understand...was me?” Reo squeaked out at last.

“There’s something I want to say to you, Reo.”

Mabu suddenly appeared in front of him as they slipped down through a column of water in Sarazanmai. His eyes glimmered gently, as if they already understood everything.

You were always telling me what I wanted to hear, Reo thought.

“Wait, don’t say it! If you say it...”

Still, he wanted to hear it from Mabu’s mouth. He wanted to relay his feelings too. It was a thoroughly selfish and yet entirely innocent desire...

“You’re my one and only partner, Reo. You always have been, and you always will be.” Reo spread his arms wide, like an all-forgiving embrace. The rhythm of their heartbeats joined and became one. “I’ve always loved you!”

A massive explosion erupted at the center of Azuma Bridge.

“Desire Absorption!” There were tears in Prince Keppi’s eyes as he swallowed down Mabu’s shirikodama. “Mabu... I promise to carry your desire into the future, ribbit...”

A violent wind sent droplets of water from the Sumida River pelting down like rain. On top of the bridge, Reo returned to his police officer form. He stood with his back facing the others, his shoulders trembling.

“Reo...” Keppi tentatively called his name.

“Heh...heh heh heh, ha ha ha! I bet this whole thing was set up by the otters, wasn’t it?! You’re not going to fool me!” Reo looked pitiful; his hands covered his face as he screeched.

“That leak was the truth, ribbit. You should already be aware of that!”

Ka-blaaaaaaam...

Reo whipped around and fired his most powerful blast. Keppi just narrowly managed to transform and block the attack from harming Kazuki and Kappa-Enta.

“Keppi!”

Keppi returned to his original form and crumpled to the ground. “Guh...”

Reo began shooting aimlessly, destroying anything and everything around them. He continued to curse at Mabu as he went. “That bastard, he broke his promise to me again...”

The sign on his gun was switching back and forth at a dizzying speed. One of the shots blew up the Shuto Expressway in the background, causing the whole bridge-like structure to collapse.

“And what am I supposed to do, huh? You went and left me behind! Weren’t you the one who told me not to let go of my desires?!”

He even blew up the neighboring Komagata Bridge.

Kazuki stepped out protectively in front of Keppi.

Reo leveled the barrel of the gun at him and said, “Give me that plate.” Kazuki

had a single silver Wishing Plate in his arms.

“No way!”

“Reo! Enough already, ribbit!”

“I’m going to get him back... I won’t let anyone stand in my way!” Overcome with rage, Reo slammed his foot against Kazuki.

“Guh!”

“Kazuki!” Enta gasped out.

Even as he fell to the ground, Kazuki kept a solid grip on the plate. “I’m not going to hand it over! I won’t give up on what’s precious to me!”

“Everyone keeps pissing me off...” growled Reo. *I’ve never given up either*, he thought.

The sign on Reo’s gun turned to *Kill*. His finger moved to the trigger, and Kazuki squeezed his eyes shut.

“Kazukiiiiii!” Enta’s cry echoed across Azuma Bridge.

Kazuki peeked his eyes open. He hadn’t been shot yet. Timidly, he lifted his head. He saw Reo standing there, a puzzled look on the man’s face.

Mabu faded from the picture the two had taken together, leaving Reo alone in the photo.

“Who...am I angry at...? Who...are all these passionate feelings for...?” Reo looked like a child who had gotten lost on the way home. “Who?! Who am I forgetting?!” Unable to bear it anymore, he began clawing at his chest. The tips of his fingers grazed something that felt strange. Upon searching his left breast pocket, he produced a silver ring.

This didn’t belong to him.

The letters patterned into its center read *Mabu*.

“What...?” Reo had no idea what those letters were supposed to represent.

Not a single clue, and yet he couldn't stop his tears from overflowing. "I...I..."

The rage and hatred he felt seconds before slipped away. He had a sense that what he had lost—whatever it was—was irreplaceable.

So lonely...

That was the only emotion he felt.

BANG!

He heard a dry crash, and when he looked down, he found a hole in the middle of his chest. Unable to stand anymore, he crumpled to his knees. "Ha ha... My chest hurts..."

Behind Reo stood Toi, a gun held in his hands.

Reo's lifeless body fell facedown. Keppi stared at it, blinking several times. Almost immediately, the man's body emitted a light. It disappeared, leaving only the four silver plates and two rings in its wake. The two silver rings were tightly connected, never to be pulled apart, each with the two men's names engraved into them.

"Reo, Mabu. Sleep for now, ribbit..."

It was still night at the Kappa Plaza, where Haruka sat in his wheelchair. Nyantaro was beside him, grooming herself.

"I had that dream again," said Haruka. "The dream where I ride an enormous Nyantaro and meet the Little Prince. The prince told me to choose between love or desire, but I was scared. It felt like if I picked one or the other, then the great big circle connecting us would be shattered..." He glanced up at the sky, eyes filled with unease.

Azuma Sara stood next to him. "The world is undergoing another trial. Is it connected or is it not?"

The sky above grew increasingly more menacing.

Suddenly, the plate headdress in Haruka's lap fell to the ground.

Ka-shiiiink!

“Oh no...”

The round, circular plate shattered into two halves.

Scene 5

ONCE THE FIVE SILVER Wishing Plates were stacked together, they transformed into a glowing golden Wishing Plate. Kazuki held it in his hands, relief in his voice as he called over to his friend, “So you came back, Toi...!”

Kappa-Enta tried to convey his appreciation as well, even as he swayed in place. “Thanks for helping out Kazu...guh...” Before he could finish, he collapsed.

“Enta!”

The timer ticking down on his life was about to run out.

“Enta: forty seconds remaining until death,” an emotionless announcer informed them.

“Hurry up and make your wish, ribbit!”

Kazuki nodded and help up the plate, but before he could do anything else, Toi interrupted, “Give me that plate.”

Kazuki glanced back to find himself staring down the barrel of Toi’s gun. “Toi?”

“My brother died. I’m going to use that to bring him back.”

Dark clouds gathered above, and soon droplets began to fall.

“Enta: fifteen seconds remaining until death,” the robotic voice droned.

A curtain of rain poured around them, filling the space that separated Toi and Kazuki. Neither said a word. In the interim, the countdown continued.

“Ten...nine...eight...seven...six...five...four...”

Kazuki squeezed the plate tightly in his arms.

“Three...two...one.”

Once the golden plate granted the wish made upon it, it shattered into tiny pieces.

The rain grew stronger. Enta could feel it pelting against his skin as he cracked open his eyes. “Mm... Was I...saved?” He looked at his hand—a human’s hand now, no longer green and webbed.

Immediately, Keppi said, “Kazuki used the plate to grant his wish, ribbit.”

Oh, so Kazuki really did use the plate for me...

Enta remembered pieces of the conversation between Kazuki and Toi moments ago, when he’d still been wracked with pain.

That means Toi’s wish...

“Toi!” The sudden sound of Kazuki’s voice broke Enta out of his reverie.

Toi and Kazuki were still separated, no closer to one another than they had been moments ago. The former lowered his gun. “I know. I’d have done the same thing in your place.” His voice was so low that it was barely audible beneath the pounding rain. He tilted his head up and gazed at the sky, sighing out his next words. “I’m so tired of all of this.”

“Toi...” Kazuki tried to approach, but thunder roared through the sky.

“Odd-er... In that case, let’s sever all the connections in this world!”

Despair: Unleash.

Black Keppi was released from his transparent taiko-shaped cage. He roared as he slammed down onto Azuma Bridge.

“D-d-d-d-d-darkness!” Wrapped in ominous flames of despair, the creature opened its mouth wide, spitting out numerous tentacles.

“Guh!” Toi immediately tried to run for it, but he was unfortunately snatched up by the dark tendrils.

“Toi!” Kazuki grabbed his outstretched hand. The other boy looked back at him with surprise.

Suddenly, Toi heard Chikai whisper into his ear, “Come with me. Come outside the circle that binds everyone together. Cut off all those boring ties you

have to other people.”

His suffering was caused by his attachments to other people.

The tentacles suddenly released him, meekly drawing back. Now that his arm was free, Toi shook Kazuki off. He heard his friend suck in a breath. His brother was waiting for him inside of Black Keppi. He didn't even bother looking back as he started in that direction.

“Tooooooi!” Kazuki shrieked.

Toi disappeared, swallowed up by the despair.

Plate 11: Sarazanmai

Scene 1

TOI COULD FEEL HIMSELF falling deeper and deeper. He was swimming in a pitch-black ocean. When suddenly gravity seemed to return, he felt himself float down and land somewhere.

“This is...”

Chikai appeared out of nowhere. He sounded amused as he said, “This is the spectacle from a few moments ago. See the panicked looks on those traitors’ faces?”

It was just as Chikai said; there they were on Azuma Bridge, witnessing the scene from just a few seconds prior. Kazuki and the others were there as well, though they were frozen, as if time were standing still.

“I’ve had enough. I just want it all to end.”

A gigantic hole opened up at his feet, like the ground itself was waiting to hear those words. “We’ll have to go to the very depths to get outside the circle. It’s a place with no beginning and no end, where nothing is connected. Before you get there, you’ll have to cut all of your ties.”

“Cut all of my ties...?” Toi still held the Tokarev in his hand.

“It’s simple. All you have to do is use that gun of yours...and shoot your past self.” Chikai laughed.

Kazuki, Enta, and Keppi followed after Toi, having slipped inside Black Keppi as well. The first place they arrived was the scene of the rain-covered Azuma Bridge. They could see themselves there, frozen in time just as they had been a few seconds earlier, but Toi’s past self was suddenly missing from the picture.

“What the...?!” said Kazuki.

“Toi intends to cut all of his ties, ribbit.” Keppi already sensed what was going on. “He’s headed toward the outside, the area that exists beyond the circle of connection, and he’s erasing himself along the way.”

“The area that exists beyond the circle of connection?” Kazuki echoed.

Enta chimed in, “That’s where those people who lost their shirikodama go!”

“If he reaches that point, all of his past relationships and even his very life will cease to exist, ribbit!”

Kazuki said, “We have to stop him!”

“Yeah,” Enta agreed.

The two, along with their mochi-like friend, hurried to the next moment in time.

The next place Toi disappeared from was the scene where the three had been playing with a soccer ball at their practice area that summer. The next was at the Otter Empire, when Kappa-Kazuki was filled with despair, and Kappa-Toi came flying at him with his fist. After that was the scene in the Kappa Plaza where Enta and Toi had been bickering.

Without missing a beat, Toi held up his gun and fired at each one of his past selves, erasing them all.

“That’s right. Throw it all away. Erase everything that led to your pain, make it so none of this ever happened.” Chikai stood beside him, egging him on. “Don’t worry. All of your pain, all of the lingering attachments you have—soon they’ll all be gone.”

Toi said nothing.

Kazuki and the others arrived too late to the scene of the Kappa Plaza. Once again, Toi’s past self was gone.

“He’s not here either!” said Kazuki.

Enta grumbled. “That jerk! Just how far back is he going?”

“Four years into the past.” That was Kazuki’s hunch. “If he really intends to cut all ties with us...then I’m sure he plans to return to the day he gave me that friendship bracelet.”

Enta looked relieved. “So you’ve finally remembered.”

“Yeah. That’s the day that bound us all together.” The very same circle that connected the three of them together was currently wrapped around his right ankle.

“As long as that bracelet doesn’t disappear, we still have time, ribbit.”

They all nodded at Keppi’s words.

An unsettling voice echoed around them, “Otterly laughable. Those who would spread poison here must be erased.” Suddenly, a torrent of water crashed over the plaza, swallowing them up.

“Huh?!”

“Oh no!” Keppi immediately shot a jet out of his butt, producing an enormous bubble that enveloped Kazuki and Enta. The bubble drifted down through the open hole of the plaza.

“Keppi!”

Keppi shouted after the two boys as they receded, “Leave this part to me! You two hurry on ahead, ribbit!” He waited there until the hole closed, then floated up to the surface.

There, he found an otter in front of him. “Odd-er. So you let two rats slip through. You certainly are kapparicious.”

“Today I’m going to end things, ribbit. I can’t let you continue your reign of terror any further, ribbit.”

The otter gave a thin smile. “Otterly laughable. You’re the one who was overwhelmed with despair and decided to abandon that part of yourself. You think *you* have any right to pass judgment?”

“Grr...!”

Otters were like mirrors that reflected desire. The otter could see how Keppi was unable to accept reality back then. Now that it had latched onto his weakness, it moved to attack. “Odd-er. This time we’ll make sure your despair swallows you whole!”

He shot countless iterations of his past self and erased them. Now, Toi was standing on the shore opposite of where the water bus stop was located. The world around him was frozen, and his ten-year-old self stood on top of the bridge, trying to throw his friendship bracelet down. Floating on the river’s surface was the ball Toi had abandoned.

“This is where we began...” That was the feeling he got. He was sure this was where it had all started.

“All you have to do is shoot your younger self, then all your remaining bonds will be severed. After that, you just have to go beyond the circle,” Chikai said quietly from behind him.

Toi adjusted his grip on the Tokarev and started across the red bridge. Chikai followed, walking beside him.

I wanted to be a soccer player. Back when my parents and brother were with me, I had no doubts about the future at all, he thought.

“But then Dad died, and you shot someone.”

I didn’t think I could hope for anything anymore. But then my brother—the only family I had left—took my hand.

“You’re still going on about that? I just used you.”

I don’t care. That was fine with me. I needed to throw that stuff away. I needed the bad stuff that happened, all of it.

“Why? Now you want to desperately cling to those attachments?”

Toi glanced back and turned the barrel of his gun at his brother. “These are the relationships I chose. I’ll end them with my own hands!”

BANG!

Hundreds of ten-thousand-yen bills went fluttering through the air. Chikai laughed as they danced around him. “In this world, it’s the bad people who survive.” Slowly, he plummeted down toward the Sumida River. “Which will you be...?” Static rippled across his body as he transformed into an otter and disappeared. “Odd-er...”

Toi silently closed his eyes. “Goodbye, Brother.” In his mind’s eye, he could see the red and blue ferry sailing away. He soon reopened his eyes and started forward again.

He was getting closer and closer to his ten-year-old self.

Any time he wanted something, he had to be prepared to lose something as well. So he always threw things away before he could lose them. That had worked pretty well for him. That’s why he figured he might as well throw away the pain this time, too.

Toi aimed his gun at his younger self. “Now I can end everything.”

BANG!

Just as he was pulling the trigger, something slammed into him. Enta tackled him, throwing off his trajectory. The bullet instead grazed Kazuki’s right ankle as he stepped protectively in front of the younger Toi. It sliced through the blue friendship bracelet tied around Kazuki’s foot.

“Gah!” Kazuki collapsed, feeling an intense burning pain.

“Kazuki!” Enta immediately raced to his side.

The impact sent Toi’s Tokarev flying. His ten-year-old self was still there, untouched. He felt his rage building. “You two...what are you doing here?”

Kazuki and Enta immediately turned their eyes toward him. “We came to get you back!”

There it was again. They were *always* doing things, regardless of what Toi actually wanted.

“I’m completely sick of you both!” he shrieked at them.

The Tokarev instantly flew up through the air and fired.

BANG!

This time, the bullet hit its mark, piercing Toi's younger self. The blue friendship bracelet he was holding abruptly disappeared.

"D-d-d-d-d-d-darkness! All of your ties shall now be consigned to oblivion!"
Black Keppi stole their consciousnesses.

Scene 2

WHEN THEY CAME TO, the three of them were falling headlong, the world white all around them. Silver rings occasionally passed them by.

“Where is this...?” Kazuki wondered aloud.

Enta shouted, “Something’s coming!”

An enormous taiko drum appeared straight ahead of them—in the direction they were falling. Three fat comma shapes were patterned into the surface of the drum. As they got closer, the pattern began to warp into a complex overlap of circles. Three circles closed around separate words: *No Beginning*, *No End*, and *No Connection*. Repelled by the silver rings around them, the three boys were flung into the center of the three rings on the drum, where a hole appeared. This was the beginning of oblivion.

Back then, Kazuki thought, I just wanted to go anywhere that wasn’t here. Since I didn’t have ties to anyone, I thought I didn’t belong. I know some part of me was just waiting—for someone to reach out and pull someone as stubborn as me forward. I found it—found them. I found a place where I can smile again. I don’t want to lose these ties!

“No... All of my memories are disappearing! All of our memories!”

It was all disappearing. The memory of the morning Toi first transferred to their class and Kazuki learned it hadn’t all been a dream. The memory of Kazuki, dressed as Sara, accidentally stumbling upon Toi as he was trying to jack that car in that high-rise parking lot. The memory of them encountering Keppi at the Kappa Plaza after somehow being summoned there. The memory of them being turned into kappa after accidentally calling Keppi a “frog.” The memory of Kazuki discovering Toi’s secret when they wore the bee ninja costumes at Hanayashiki. Even the memory of them recovering Nyantaro and how Toi fought with them over the whole Wishing Plates thing.

Back then, Enta thought, I just wanted to go anywhere that wasn't here. I was a coward always looking in from the outside. I know some part of me was waiting—for those hopeless delusions of mine to be shattered into pieces. I suck at backing down, so I don't plan to let go of either of them. I want us all to laugh together forever!

“No... At this rate, it's all going to disappear!”

It was all disappearing. The memory of him starting the fight at their practice area, and how Toi saved him—not Kazuki, as his fantasies would have had him believe. The memory of him returning the blue friendship bracelet to Kazuki and making his once-in-a-lifetime confession. The memory of the strange tension between him and Kazuki as they wrestled skin to skin in a sumo match. The memory of his own delusion in which Kappa-Kazuki kicked his Miracle Shot. The memory of his own impending death, and how Kazuki raced toward Enta screaming, tears in his eyes.

Back then, Toi thought, I just wanted to go anywhere that wasn't here. Unable to laugh or cry, I let go of all hope. I'm sure some part of me was waiting—for the leaden sin I had in my hands to possess me and kill me. I wasn't supposed to belong to anyone or anywhere. I wasn't supposed to possess anything that I couldn't just throw away, and yet...

It was all disappearing. The memory of Kazuki's fat-ass cat eating the weed he had painstakingly grown. The memory of when he dressed up at Hanayashiki and held hands with Sara-Kazuki as the two searched for the feline. The memory of Sara-Kazuki's inability to properly slurp down soba noodles when he came to Toi with his plan for kidnapping the real Azuma Sara. The memory of Enta telling him how he liked the flavor of Sobakyuu's noodles. The memory of his secret with Chikai being leaked to the other two after they retrieved a shirikodama. The memory of how he railed against Kazuki after the latter was in shock over his brother finding out that he was dressing up as Sara, and how he and Enta had gotten into it immediately afterward.

“Stop...”

Toi liked the time they'd spent just chatting casually after school.

"I don't want to lose it all..."

Though he reluctantly agreed to join their soccer practice, part of him really looked forward to it.

"Kazuki... Enta..."

At some point, spending every day with the two of them had just become natural to him.

"I don't want to lose what's precious to me!"

The tears that threatened now burst out of him.

"Saraaaaaaaaaaaaa!" Toi shouted out in as loud of a voice as he could manage, straining his throat. As if in answer, he could hear two other voices joining him.

"Saraaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Saraaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Toi extended his hands outward. Something warm grazed his skin—Kazuki and Enta's hands!

With their hands held together, they refused to let go of their desires. Together they cried, "Sarazanmai!"

Keppi suddenly appeared in response to their voices. "Ribbit!" He broke through the Oblivion Field and sucked the three of them up, spitting them out in their kappa forms above Asakusa.

"Okay!" said Kazuki.

Enta looked over at him. "Kazuki!"

"What's our plan?" Toi asked.

As the three of them fell, Kazuki held a pristine blue friendship bracelet in his hand. "We still have this bracelet."

Kazuki's own ten-year-old self was still standing at the base of Azuma Bridge four years ago. He wasn't sure if this was the right answer or not, but

regardless, whatever they had lost, he wanted to fix it.

“We’re going to deliver this friendship bracelet to my younger self!”

Keppi transformed himself into a parachute and latched onto the three of them.

“D-d-d-d-d-darkness!”

The space around them fissured, and Black Keppi appeared. Azuma Bridge warped into a Desire Field.

“It’s time for me to come to terms with my own despair, ribbit. This will be your last Sarazanmai, ribbit!”

There is something we have to take back:

Our connection.

We don’t want to pretend it never existed.

There is something we have to take back:

Our connection.

We won’t let anyone take it from us

Ever.

“Kappature it!”

You and I are supposed to be connected.

Kappa-Kazuki and his friends sang together as they sprinted toward his younger self. In the sky above, Keppi and Black Keppi were locked in a fierce battle. The otter underlings swarmed around them, trying to impede Keppi, as well as Kazuki and his friends. The situation was dire—the Kappa Zombies they faced before now didn’t even compare. Even so, they couldn’t give up.

“Otterly impossible...” The otter appeared in front of the three injured kappa and began singing. “I won’t allow you to connect to your desires! I am a concept!”

An enormous taiko drum came smashing down on the three of them.

“Gwaaah!”

They were sent blasting through the air, but they still managed a completely graceful landing, where they struck their usual poses.

The boys could still fight.

They hadn’t given up.

They were still connected.

Burn on with passion.

Cast away common sense.

You can take your bets on the truth.

Serve up your soul on a plate, stack them up

Catch the ball, pluck it out.

Grant our wish,

Sarazanmai!

“Ribbit!”

Now that Keppi had the upper hand in the aerial battle, his black counterpart was making a run for it. Keppi aimed for Black Keppi’s butt and launched himself through the air.

Fusion: Commencing.

“I’ve captured my desires!”

As if in response to Keppi’s cry, the plates with “A” marked on them that littered the entirety of Asakusa suddenly all floated into the air.

Kappa-Kazuki and his friends rushed to get to his younger self’s side. “Just a bit farther!”

Darkness suddenly fell, as if someone pulled a curtain over them. “Otterly impossible!” The otter had swollen up in size, growing into a giant that now fully encompassed the bridge.

“Dammit, it’s so dark I can’t see anything!” Kazuki cursed.

Even the distant silhouette of Kazuki’s younger self was swallowed up by the shadows.

A sparkling pair of silver rings flew out of Keppi’s shell as he fused with Black Keppi. Light arced across the sky like a falling star, crossing over the Sumida River. The ring expelled a brilliant flash of light as Reo and Mabu appeared, clad in black military-like uniforms. They gripped each other’s hands firmly and yelled together.

“Don’t let go!”

“Of your desire!”

As if in response to their voices, the plates came cascading down like a meteor shower onto the bridge. They stacked one behind the other, radiating light that illuminated a path for the boys to follow.

“I can see the way now!” Kappa-Kazuki declared, his eyes on their final objective.

Toi and Enta lifted the other boy up as they raced down the path. “Make sure it gets to him!”

The three of them were connected, with Kazuki at the front of their line as they hurtled through the air toward the younger Kazuki. At last, the fully repaired circle—the friendship bracelet—made it into the palm of his tiny hand.

Fusion: Complete.

“We’re connected!” Keppi declared, as he and his dark counterpart merged.

The world was once again connected.

“I am an otter... I am a concept...” The outline of the enormous otter began to blur as his entire silhouette dissipated. “Farewell. It seems it was...otterly possible after all.”

With the otter gone, there was just a single shiny, glimmering star left. Keppi returned to his original form. His voice had a dignified tone as he cried out, “The time has come. Cross! Pass over the river of desire!”

Their awareness of themselves seemed to melt away as easily as chocolate in the sunlight.

Whether it was reality or a dream, who could say? It was a strange feeling—as if becoming one with the universe, as if his body wasn’t his own. He wasn’t sure if he was Yasaka Kazuki, Kuji Toi, or Jinnai Enta. Their consciousnesses harmonized perfectly together. It was as if they were molecules drifting in a hot, primordial ocean, smacking against each other’s thin membranes before combining into one. The heat made him want to scream. The energy was like nothing he’d ever felt before, and the pleasure felt like purifying water welling up beneath his skin.

There was just one thing the three of them did understand: this would be the last leak they would share together.

“The future is leaking!”

Scene 3

“WE WANT TO BE connected!” Their voice rang out together.

Their voices echoed together as Japan’s athletes, the representatives of their country, all dressed in blue uniforms, stepped forward. The setting for this dream was the first match in the World Cup. Kazuki and his teammates were forced into a tough battle. Time was running out. If this pass didn’t make it, the game was over. They had to score.

Kazuki ran forward.

I want to steal this victory from them!

“We want to be connected!”

After injuring his right leg, Kazuki was fed up with the extensive stint he’d spent in rehab. No one close to him would say as much, but he could tell the prospects of recovery looked grim.

Even if I keep going, my efforts won’t be rewarded.

“We want to be connected!”

Toi crouched down inside a jail cell. He confessed to all of his sins.

I will never be forgiven for this.

“We want to be connected!”

Snow fell on the Azuma Bridge. Enta was dressed in his practice uniform, his eyes on the ground as tears flowed down his cheeks. Kazuki’s footsteps were gradually receding into the distance.

If he leaves now, we’ll never see each other again.

“We want to be connected!”

Kazuki was on his crutches, glancing down at a picture of him and Enta in their soccer outfits—the Golden Duo. He threw it and his cleats into the stadium’s trash can.

I want to lie about how I really feel.

“We want to be connected!”

A blue friendship bracelet was abandoned in the locker room. Toi voluntarily left the team.

I’d rather betray them before they abandon me.

“We want to be connected!”

The three were in their uniforms, bickering amongst themselves in the waiting room.

We can’t be connected anymore.

“We want to be connected!”

Enta was alone, bashing his fists against the wall.

No matter what I do, it doesn’t get through to them.

“We want to be connected!”

Toi was overwhelmed with agony at how much he had lost.

I’m alone. There’s no one by my side.

“We want to be connected!”

The three raced across the field, their gazes focused on what lay ahead of them.

We're not giving up yet!

Enta's pass made it to Toi.

One of them had once shouted, "I've had enough!"

Toi immediately passed the ball.

One of them had once told the others, "I'm through with you guys!"

Kazuki ran on ahead of them.

One of them had even said, "I never want to see you guys again!"

They had hurt each other so many times—too many to count.

And yet...

Still...

Despite it all...

Kazuki slammed his foot into the ball, his friendship bracelet swaying with the motion. The ball blasted through the air toward the goalpost.

Even so, we...!

The kingdom's remaining people were gathered in the Kappa Plaza.

"The dish is a vessel of life. Things are given shape, but someday will be shattered and lost..." said Sara. She was sitting on a pedestal, with Reo and Mabu standing before her in their military uniforms.

"What the boys saw was a glimpse into the future," said Reo.

Mabu added, "One of the possible futures that await them."

Prince Keppi drifted down from the air above. "For the moment, this world's circle of connection endures. However, there is no guarantee that the future ahead of them will always be a bright one."

The two broken halves of the cosplay headdress floated through the air,

shining with light as they transformed into a crown and tiara. Reo and Mabu respectfully placed these glimmering objects on the heads of their king and queen.

“Hope and despair come hand in hand with life.”

Haruka’s eyes sparkled as he looked at the divine forms of the Kappa Kingdom’s king and queen. “Wow! It’s the Little Prince and his princess!”

Queen Sara, who’d regained her original form, said, “Do not forget. Only those who can connect to their desires, even after knowing the pain of loss, have the ability to grasp the future in their hands.”

All of the “A” signs across the city twinkled in celebration.

“I won’t forget,” said Haruka. “I’m going to choose, and I’m going to believe in the choices I make.”

The long night would soon be over.

There were three figures strewn across the collapsed Azuma Bridge as dawn colored the sky above. Whether unconscious or merely sleeping, they showed no signs of waking. Kazuki lay there with a new scar on his right ankle. Nearby, Enta had bandages wrapped over the gunshot wound he’d sustained. Toi was close to them as well, his Tokarev abandoned on the ground beside him.

“The people in my life, the people I care about—I experience happiness and sadness because of them. That’s how I know we’re all connected.” Haruka and Nyantaro sat close to the river, gazing up at the sky.

As Keppi and the others left, light seemed to fill the space between them, connecting them. They lit up the sky with a constellation in the shape of an “A” before they disappeared entirely.

And so, our summer was over.

Epilogue 1:

Three Years Later

“YOU BETTER NOT come back here again. Your life is only just beginning.” Toi was well acquainted with the officer by now, who spoke with a gentle look in his eyes. “You did a great job while you were here,” the man said as he saw Toi off.

The prison gate opened in front of him. Toi stepped out, his silhouette seeming to melt against the hot rays of the sun.

He could see Skytree through the train window. It was finally starting to feel real to him that he had come home. At Sobakyuu, his uncle was hanging out the curtain to show they were open for the day. The way he smacked at his lower back with a fist made Toi remember how many days—months—had passed since they last saw each other.

I’m sorry for all the trouble I caused. I hope you’ll let me stay here again.

He knew that he should lower his head and say those words. Instead, he turned his back and walked away.

The world overflows with connections. Blood connections, geographical connections, emotional connections. Everyone is connected in this world.

A new kappa statue had been erected in Kappa Plaza. The Jumbotron hanging outside the Matsuya department store was broadcasting a different local television show now, called Asakusa Ribbit TV. On it, an unfamiliar girl sang a profoundly mysterious song.

Those who disappear are left behind and forgotten.

Chikai's words suddenly sprang to Toi's mind. This city certainly had forgotten his brother, it seemed. He was sure it had forgotten him as well.

At some point he arrived at the big red bridge, looking just as he remembered it. He slumped against the rails, basking in the sun's rays as he gazed down at the Sumida River. Its current continued, even in his absence. Just as the current of time continued to flow, so too did the river's water.

But my life is completely over now. The things I lost will never come back.

He kicked off the top of the rails and shouted, "And so what!"

Splooosh!

A pillar of mist sprayed through the air as he crashed through the river's surface. The river water was cold, leeching the heat from his body. He closed his eyes, only to hear a familiar song drift to his ears.

There is something we have to take back:

Our connection.

There is something we can't let anyone discover:

Our secrets.

Splooosh!

Splooosh!

Two more misty pillars blasted up through the air. Kazuki and Enta, clad in their high school uniforms, appeared before Toi. When they surfaced, Kazuki was the first to open his mouth and cry, "Welcome home, Toi!"

Enta burst up out of the river after him. "We were waiting for you!"

He never imagined they would come all the way here. "What are you guys here for?" He sounded subdued. "I'm sick of you both!" But, underneath that

clear blue sky, Kazuki and Enta saw the broad smile stretching out across Toi's face.

They didn't need to become kappa anymore. They didn't need plates that could make their wishes come true. No matter when, no matter where, even if they weren't physically together, they were always connected.

And so they cried...

"Saaaa!"

"Saaaa!"

"Saaaa!"

And then all together, "Sarazanmai!"

Let's run forth! To a completely brand new future that awaits us!

Epilogue 2:

Our Intertwined Hands and an End to the Cold and Solitude

HE HAD TO DO whatever was necessary to survive. He'd feel the pangs of hunger no matter what he did. Those blessed with wealth and abundance wouldn't miss anything he stole from them.

I'm not going to possess anything anymore. Then no one can steal from me.

It was lively in the downtown district, where a child's brown-skinned hand stretched up toward one of the food stalls. Fresh cucumbers were lined up there. Reo snatched one and took off running. The shop owner rained curses on him from behind. Inwardly, he stuck his tongue out at the man. *The real fool is the guy who let a kid steal his stuff.*

Reo retreated to a dry, deserted riverbed and caught his breath. He glanced down at the prize in his arms and felt a wave of relief. Suddenly, a droplet of water beaded over the skin of the cucumber. He looked up to see that clouds gathered overhead, pelting rain down at him.

"Tch..."

What a waste of his good mood.

Right as he was contemplating where he might take shelter, a voice from behind broke in, "Why did you steal?"

He flipped around to find a boy about the same age as him standing there. The only difference was that this boy seemed completely relaxed compared to him.

So he saw me?

"So what? You got a problem with it?" Reo roared back at him, lips peeling back over his pointed teeth.

The other boy showed no signs of flinching. "No, I don't. Do you always

steal?”

“Yeah, that’s right. I don’t have any money. Not that spoiled, prissy boys like you would understand what that’s like!” Reo’s rage fueled him and he went off.

The boy’s green eyes, hidden behind his glasses, widened. Their eyes were the same color. The same, and yet completely different.

As if the rain wasn’t enough of a nuisance, now there’s this kid, too.

Reo started to walk away, but something grabbed the hem of his tattered clothing, causing his body to pitch forward and slam into the ground. “Ouch!” The moment he lifted himself up, his eyes landed on his cucumber, now soaked in mud. “You’ve gotta be freakin’ kidding me...” His body trembled.

A small hand outstretched toward him. When he glanced up, he found himself face to face with those green eyes.

“My name’s Mabu. If you’re alone, then let’s go together.”

No way.

Reflexively, Reo slapped the other boy’s hand away.

“Ow!” Mabu cried, retracting his hand.

Serves you right. You ruined my dinner!

On Mabu’s hand, the dark red marks where Reo’s nails dug in stood in stark contrast to the pallor of his skin. Mabu just stared at the wound before poking his tiny little tongue out and lapping at it. Then, he held his other hand out toward Reo. “It’s okay, really. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“What is wrong with you?! Do you think you’re God, or something?!” It irked him so much. Reo could feel tears spring to his eyes.

“...You’re the God here, aren’t you?”

Stunned, Reo blurted, “Huh?”

“Never mind, let’s go.” Mabu grabbed his hand.

It had been a long time since he felt another person’s warmth. It was surprisingly hot. Reo felt like crying, which he was sure had to be the rain’s fault. Or the fact that his stomach was growling.

They were moving steadily forward when Mabu suddenly looked back at him. Panicked, Reo averted his eyes. “Wh-what?”

“What should I call you? I’m Mabu.”

“Yeah, you told me that just a minute ago.” He paused, then said, “Reo.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Huh?”

What a weirdo. A pretentious weirdo. But what else did he expect from a rich person?

“Hey, you,” Reo said. “You owe me for that cucumber.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of it. Is there anything else you want to eat?”

He’d said that mostly as an excuse for digging his heels in. He never expected Mabu would take him seriously *and* entertain further requests. Was this guy really that loaded?

After a beat, Reo answered, “Broccoli and ningyo-yaki.”

“That’s a strange combination,” said Mabu. “Is it tasty?”

“You don’t eat them together!” Or was he just really that much of an airhead?

Reo suddenly glanced down and noticed their hands were still intertwined. The mud from his own hand now stained Mabu’s pure white one. He suddenly lost his appetite.

“I like that too.” Mabu’s abrupt declaration made his heart jump out of his chest.

“Wh-wha?!”

Mabu looked back at him quizzically. “Ningyo-yaki. I like it too.”

“I-I didn’t actually say I *like* those things,” Reo huffed.

“Oh, really?”

“I’m done with liking things and wanting things.”

“You can’t say that!” Mabu suddenly shouted.

Reo’s shoulders seized up. The two of them stopped walking.

Mabu turned and faced him head-on, a serious expression on his face. “Don’t let go of your desire. Desire is what keeps you alive!”

“Okay...”

“Someone I respect taught me that. If we stop wanting or liking things, we can’t keep living.” Mabu grasped Reo’s hand more firmly, unconvinced that his point was getting across. “That’s what I’m doing right now. I want to hold your hand, so that’s what I’m doing.”

I don’t get this kid. I’m dirty, disheveled, pathetic, and underhanded. I’m nothing. I even hate myself. But he’s saying he’ll humor my desires?

“Heavy words. You better hold yourself to them, Mabu.”

Then I’ll just have to mess with him!

“I plan on it,” Mabu said. “I take good care of anything I rescue off the streets.”

“Huh?! What kind of rubbish is that?!”

“It’s not rubbish.”

“I’ll snap your plate in half!”

The two continued their lively bickering all the way to the castle of the Kappa Kingdom’s crown prince.

There’s no way I’m ever letting go of this hand, now that I’ve held it.

Author Biographies

Kunihiko Ikuhara Born December 21. Anime director. After gaining popularity for his work on *Sailor Moon*, Ikuhara directed his own original anime, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, in 1997. He was director for *Mawaru Penguindrum* in 2011 and *Yurikuma Arashi* in 2015. He's currently the writer for the manga series *Nokemono to Hanayome+*, illustrated by Nakamura Asumiko.

Teruko Utsumi Born December 6. Lives in Kyoto Prefecture. Works as a representative for the animation company Lupin Track. Is also part of a Kyoto band called *Ghostlight*. Enjoys fishing and tokusatsu.



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